cat's cradle

By: rumiberri

AU. They say a cat has nine lives, but for Homura, it feels like she has lived nine too many. Maybe this time, she'll finally get everything right and save Madoka. The only problem though, like always, is getting there. [Slow build up] [eventual MadokaxHomura] [Don'tworrytheothercharactersareinheretoo] [AU][Meow][No Rebellion]

Rated: Fiction T - English - Hurt/Comfort/Friendship - [Madoka K., Homura A.] - Chapters: 18 - Words: 112,038 - Reviews: 84 - Favs: 44 - Follows: 58 - Updated: May 3 - Published: Jan 25 - id: 10051543

Chapter 1: restart, redo, re-cycle

Eyes open.

She finds herself staring at a familiar ceiling; an always familiar ceiling. Instead of the usual feelings of self-hatred and despair, she merely closes her eyes, sighing slowly.

The previous timeline—compared to the many others she had cycled through—had been... different.

It had also been the closest she had ever been at fulfilling her original wish, but she isn't sure if she would have been glad if they had won.

It would've been interesting, at least, but...

She shakes her head to free her thoughts; no use dwelling on it now.

She opens her eyes and sits up.

If she takes into account of what usually happens after a reset, things should be relatively back to normal once more.

Everything is already another memory that only she knows existed.

She nods to herself, strengthening her resolve, before she throws off the hospital issued covers and steps onto the cold metal floor.

Another month.

Another chance.

Another lifetime.

With her soul gem grasped securely in her hands and red framed glasses slipped into place, she crosses the floor, stopping when she finds herself in front of the sole mirror in the room.

The reflection that stares back at her is the same as always (except it isn't). Pale, thin, weak, *useless:* the girl that she used to be. Long, dark black hair tied into two braids. Lavender eyes inherited from her mother (that have long since turned cold, after seeing too much happen, in too many timelines). The same purple pajamas that remind her of things she doesn't want to remember.

She holds up her hand, concentrating on the magic contained within the purple jewel. Focuses on healing her eyes. To her surprise, she feels something twitch on the top of her head. Her eyes move up, and she stares in shock as her reflection confirms her fears. She sighs, and merely concentrates harder; her healing magic is weaker in this timeline due to her...additional traits.

Maybe, this had happened because she had been so *close* in the previous timeline. Somewhere out there, someone is cheering for her and they want her to win.

She scoffs at that thought, black cat ears atop her head twitching in annoyance, and the tail that's hidden within her pajamas tugs at the fabric as it reflexively tries to flicker from side to side.

Just—great.

Another timeline—that might become a permanent timeline—where she's stuck with magical powers that are linked to animal traits.

There's only one way to describe this, and that would be embarrassin**g.**

Author's Note: Waters have been tested. That being said, prepare for OOC (though I try not to vary too much) and drama and angst and comfort and the power of friendship and love and peace (the last one.. maybe.) It's going to be a story mainly focused on Homura, with a build up to Madoka x Homura, and the other three are thrown in there and other supporting characters scattered around. OCs will be little, if any, and descriptions will be lacking and you will cry at my overuse of semicolons, ()'s and dashes. I haven't seen the movies, so it's definitely pre-Rebellion and definitely AU. It's a different take on the original storyline from the anime, so remember that. Annd... my characterizations are mostly from me taking what I know about the anime, and then from all those japanese comics that are out there about the PMMM cast and mixing and meshing them until I have what you see here.

There's also no guarantee I'll finish this, so at least I hope someone enjoys it somewhere.

Chapter 2: the beginning

As Homura walks slowly towards Mitakihara Middle School, she's running completely on autopilot as her feet take her down the familiar route. Her thoughts are elsewhere, occupied as they run through the plans that she has decided during the days she had before school started.

Due to the events in the previous cycle, she has decided that she will treat this timeline as if it will become *the one*.

That is, she will try and make this timeline continue as perfectly as possible. She will make sure Charlotte doesn't eat Mami, that Sayaka doesn't turn into a witch and drag Kyouko with her. Most importantly though, will be that they defeat Walpurgisnacht without Madoka making a contract.

Easy and simple.

Simple and easy.

If Homura's ears and tail were visible, they would've been twitching out of nervousness. Instead, all anyone can see is her passive face as she continues on her way to where this timeline will finally, really begin. Though she wants to deny it, she feels a spark of hope ignite from deep within and her lips almost tug upwards.

The impossible may be finally coming to an end.

\

This timeline being *the one* means that Homura will try and gain the trust of everyone. Which mostly means that she will not antagonize the people who always (always!) ruin her plans. It also means no weird glares thrown to Madoka, and no strange speeches meant to scare her into submission.

She is polite to her peers while remaining mysterious and aloof. She also makes sure not to stand out too much during P.E. Too much magic in her body and her ears will end up popping up, and she will be automatically labeled as a 'weirdo cosplayer,' which is what had happened in the previous timeline.

During break, she has Madoka escort her to the nurse's office. They exchange a polite conversation that Homura manipulates, because there is no way she will not have the defining moment from their (first) friendship not occur. Homura however, does not lead the way, she doesn't tell Madoka to stay the same and she manages to get Madoka to call her by her first name.

All in all, a success.

Madoka seems shy and quiet around her, but she doesn't mind that. If things go as planned, then she will finally have all the time in the world to become close friends with Madoka once more.

/

Though the cycles and timelines and events repeated, things always varied and things were never exactly the same. Whether it meant witches spawning a few days early or late, or new witches appearing where previously there had been none, Homura has seen it all.

The one timeline when Mami had been a brunette had thrown her off for a bit, but that is a story for another day...

So, as she follows Madoka and Miki Sayaka when they exit the music shop, she isn't at all surprised when her cat ears and tail suddenly appear. They always run into a barrier on this day, and this timeline is no exception.

She remains hidden in the shadows, moving quickly to shorten the gap between her and the two girls that are being unconsciously lured closer and closer to the barrier.

Unwilling to let herself be discovered—at least not until the last possible moment, Homura remains untransformed even as the barrier washes over them and traps them inside.

She hears and watches as Madoka screams, as Sayaka yells and suddenly little mustached familiars spring up to surround them.

She waits though, knowing that Mami will always come in to save them. Homura has reason to assume it's because Kyuubey always leads her straight to them.

Sneaky bastard.

Just as Madoka stumbles and Homura feels she can delay it no longer, the sound of a familiar gunshot echoes through the area. There's a flash of light, and the familiar that had been advancing towards the fallen girl disappears.

Enter Tomoe Mami.

Homura sighs in relief from her hiding spot. Mami says some encouraging words to Madoka and Sayaka before putting on a flashy show.

"Tiro! FINALE!"

A huge canon—because something that size could not still be called a mere gun—plows through the witch, completely destroying it. Shortly after, Homura hears the tink as the grief seed falls onto the concrete floor.

As the barrier fades and the colours of the real world return, Homura quickly wills her ears and tail away. Just as she turns back to face the others, Tomoe Mami throws the grief seed her way.

"This is what you wanted, right?"

"Homu...ra-chan?" Madoka looks at the girl who was revealed once the barrier disappeared. "W-were you trapped too?"

Homura doesn't answer and merely steps closer to the trio. Sayaka immediately moves closer to Madoka, face suspicious, while Mami watches the dark-haired girl with shaded eyes. Homura looks her over as well, taking note that Tomoe Mami has no animal ears. Has no tail.

Silently, Homura curses her luck.

A half animal Mami is easy to deal with; a human Mami...not so much.

Knowing that she still has yet to respond, Homura pauses, before giving a subtle nod to Mami in thanks and pockets the grief seed. Mami immediately smiles. Her transformation disperses in a flash of light and she quickly turns to the other two girls.

"My name is Tomoe Mami and I'm a magical girl."

/

The familiarity of Mami's apartment never really fades with Homura, even when she spends cycles avoiding the blonde girl like the plague.

She remembers the first time she stepped foot inside, and every other time after that. She takes note that in this timeline, the bookshelf in the living room has swapped places with the small table lined with house plants. Those, if Homura bothered to check, always changed with every new restart.

Mami gestures to the low triangular shaped glass table in the middle of the room, telling everyone to have a seat while she goes to the kitchen to grab refreshments for her guests. Madoka offers to help, following after her and Homura settles in her usual spot at the table; near the balcony with a clear view of the front door. Sayaka watches her, still quite suspicious of the mysterious girl. Somehow, she feels that Homura can't be trusted and deliberately takes a seat across from her.

Madoka and Mami's idle chatter is their only background as Sayaka and Homura sit in silence, waiting for the two to return. Homura seems at ease despite the tense atmosphere, while Sayaka taps her fingers on the glass table in slight agitation though she has no idea why she feels that way.

"So...transfer student."

Homura's not surprised when the other girl breaks the quiet.

"You're a magical girl like Mami-san, right?"

Knowing she has resolved to try and make this *the one,* Homura humors Miki Sayaka's attempts at small talk.

"Yes," she says, flicking her hair behind her at the same time; it's a bad habit that she had picked up sometime ago that she's still trying to break.

At her reply, Sayaka frowns. "So, why didn't you step in to help Mami-san then?"

Here, Homura knows she has to tread carefully. Mami had most likely noticed Homura as soon as she had arrived; magical signatures stood out like a sore thumb, after all. While Homura could lie, and say that she had arrived too late to lend a hand, Mami can easily refute that. And that, will only serve to put a black mark towards Homura's still blank reputation.

So, she knows she will have to appeal to them somehow through another lie.

As her mouth opens to reply, Madoka and Mami's entrance into the living room interrupts her answer.

"I hope Earl Grey is to everyone's liking?" Mami smiles as she sets her tray with teacups and a teapot onto the middle of the table. Madoka follows after her and places her tray with plates of cakes down as well.

Homura glances at the table and then back to Mami. Normally, she would accept whatever was placed in front of her without complaint. Tea did in fact pair well with any sweet dessert, after all. In this timeline, however, Homura is a bit different and something else seems more delicious than the bitter liquid that is being steeped into perfection.

Licking her lips nervously, Homura decides to take the plunge.

"...would it be alright if I had a cup of milk instead?"

Mami blinks before giving Homura a smile. "Of course, Akemi-san! I'll bring a cup right away."

The other three watch as Mami hurries into the kitchen to fulfill Homura's request. Sayaka suddenly snickers and Homura looks at her almost warily.

"Milk?" Sayaka asks as she laughs harder.

"...Is there something funny about drinking milk, Miki-san?" Though her voice and face remain passive, Homura is less than amused. Madoka somehow knows and tries to calm Sayaka down.

"Sayaka-chan!" she scolds her even though she herself thinks it's cute how the mysterious and cool transfer student prefers *milk* to tea.

"W-what are you? An elementary school kid?" Sayaka manages to choke out as she grins at Homura. "Is tea too bitter for the little transfer student?"

"S-Sayaka-chan!" Madoka gives Homura an apologetic smile. "I still add in a bunch of cream and sugar to my tea too," she tells her. "Guess I'm still like a kid as well."

Homura blinks but a cup of milk is suddenly placed in front of her. It distracts her and she forces her cat ears down from popping out in excitement.

"Here you go, Akemi-san. I'll be happy to get you some more later," Mami tells her as she takes a seat at the last unoccupied area of the table.

"...Thank you," Homura murmurs and tunes the others out as she takes a sip of her milk.

Bliss.

Cake, cups, forks and knives are passed around and everyone digs into their offered snacks. When they're finally settled in, Mami decides that they should continue their discussion about witches, magical girls, wishes and signed contracts.

Most of the conversation is handled by Mami, with occasional comments here and there from Kyuubey, who had materialized in after the cakes had been served. Homura decides to refrain from adding in her input. She instead lies and tells them that she hasn't been a magical girl that long. She drinks her milk quietly as Sayaka and Madoka ask Mami and Kyuubey about the road to becoming a 'hero.'

Mami, as always, wants the two to sign a contract and join her on her quest to save the world. She does, at least, warn them of the potential dangers and suggests that the two tag along on a real witch hunt before making a decision. Homura keeps her thoughts to herself, easing her annoyance by concentrating on her milk. Mami at least keeps her appeased by the quick refills.

By the time the meeting is over and they're parting ways, Homura can feel the milk inside her stomach sloshing around with every movement. Sayaka, on the other hand, is left wondering if the transfer student has some kind of weird unhealthy obsession with the liqui**d.**

Chapter 3: cat's outta the bag

Next day.

School.

Lunch.

Homura wasn't always a fan of lunch time. Before meeting Madoka and before she had been too sick, it always meant hiding out in the nurse's office with only her and her store bought bentou to keep her company. When her sickness became too much, it meant eating a bland, lonely meal in the confines of her hospital room.

She is now long over those feelings, however. Lunch is now considered to be just one of those normal things she has to do. Normal things, like waking up and going to school. Like finishing up homework and studying for her tests. Normal things to prevent herself from spiraling into the insanity that she is always only one step ahead of.

As she stands to go buy her lunch, a familiar voice catches her attention. She glances up and Madoka is suddenly there, in front of her desk.

"Homura-chan! Let's eat lunch together!" Whatever had happened yesterday had broken the ice between them; Homura is suddenly reminded of *her* Madoka (*every*, Madoka).

"Ah." Shaking herself from her stupor, Homura nods slowly. "Sure, Madoka...You're going to eat on the roof, right?"

Madoka tilts her head in wonder. "E-eh? How did you know?"

A quick glance away and then back. "It seems like a popular place to eat..."

"Aah—"

"Madoka! Hurry up! We're leaving without you!"

They both turn to see Sayaka and another girl, Shizuki Hitomi, looking expectantly at the only two remaining students in the room.

"Ahh! Wait up, Sayaka-chan!" Madoka looks flustered and quickly faces Homura again since she has yet to answer.

"...You can go first," Homura nods in confirmation. "I'll meet you there."

Madoka looks disappointed but brightens when she realizes that Homura has accepted her invitation. She smiles. "Okay! Don't take too long!" she says before she gives Homura a parting wave as she hurries across the room to reach Sayaka and Hitomi.

Sayaka gives Homura a glance and then she pushes the other two out the door, leaving Homura as the last in the room.

She sighs softly before she flicks her hair behind her.

\\

It takes her longer than expected as she goes around the school grounds, searching for that one vending machine that has that flavor of milk she likes; *strawberry*, Madoka's favourite. For some reason, just like Mami's house plants, the contents in the vending machines never stayed the same. Fifteen minutes pass before she finally takes the stairs that lead to the roof.

Squinting her eyes once the darker stairway opens into the brightness of clear skies, Homura waits for her eyes to adjust before looking around. The roof is generally pretty empty and she spots that familiar shade of pink easily. She isn't surprised to see the smaller girl noticing her arrival and her eager waving has her heart skipping a beat, in a good way.

Homura quickly clears the distance between them and Madoka smiles at her.

"Homura-chan! I thought you weren't going to show up! Or that you got lost!"

"Sure took your time, eh transfer student?" Sayaka comments with a mouth full of rice.

Hitomi merely gives her a polite nod in greeting and continues to eat her bentou.

Madoka pats the empty seat next to her. Her eyes narrow suddenly when she notices that Homura has two blocks of Calorie Mate and two milk boxes in her hands and nothing else.

"Uhm, Homura-chan?"

With grace that rivals Hitomi's own, Homura brushes her skirt under her as she takes a seat before turning to Madoka.

"...Yes, Madoka?"

"I-is that your lunch?"

Blink. "Yes," Homura nods, not at all denying her simple meal. She takes in Madoka's worried look and shakes her head. "It's alright, Madoka. There's enough calories sufficient to cover more than one meal." Her words are meant to reassure but the frown on Madoka's face doesn't disappear. Instead, she can suddenly feel Sayaka's stare on her as well as Hitomi's less intense gaze.

"Uh oh," Sayaka mutters in between bites and Hitomi merely gives a soft sigh.

They both know how serious Madoka takes her job as the nurse's office assistant and they're not disappointed when the usual kind and timid girl does a 180°.

"That's not good, Homura-chan!" Madoka scolds her after she recovers from her shock. "Right now we're at the age where it's super important to maintain a healthy diet—" she pauses because she knows Sayaka's going mention something about their less than healthy eating habits after school— "somewhat," she says directly to Sayaka before turning back to Homura, "which means at least eating three square meals a day with real food, not..." she gestures to the milk box that Homura is now drinking, "empty calories!"

Taking another sip, Homura glances away from Madoka as the girl's speech takes her away to another time when another Madoka had given the still glasses wearing Homura a similar sounding speech. She can't help but have those same feelings of guilt—like she was disappointing Madoka somehow (like always!) and doesn't know (remember) how to rectify the situation. In the previous timeline, she hadn't joined them for lunch until later in the week, where Mami was already offering to make an extra bentou for her since she was already making one for Kyouko.

And the timelines before that—Homura had been avoiding Madoka as she took a break to recover from one of the worse cycles she had had so far.

She swallows nervously and removes the straw from her lips. "I apologize, Madoka. I—will bring a proper lunch tomorrow...?"

There's something so awkward sounding yet endearing about Homura's statement that the irritation Madoka feels disappears. She suddenly realizes that she's scaring Homura.

"A-ah, I'm sorry Homura-chan!" Madoka gives her a friendly smile, showing her she's not really mad. "I didn't mean to yell—but it's important to eat a real lunch!" Madoka tells her. "Especially considering that you've only recently been released from the hospital!"

Homura nods in understanding. It surprises Madoka when she sees the poker face on the stoic girl crack, seemingly relieved that Madoka isn't really mad at her.

Why did Madoka's opinion weigh so much...?

Shaking her head slightly, Madoka merely reaches back to grab her bentou she had set aside during her tirade and holds it out to Homura. "My dad usually packs too much in my bentou for me to eat, so you can have some of mine!"

Homura, of course, declines. "It wouldn't be right of me to take some of your lunch due to my own negligence; sharing your lunch would mean you would have less of a balanced meal."

Madoka barely manages to not sigh in exasperation as her own words are thrown back. But, she isn't discouraged. If Homura won't accept food directly, then she merely has to take a different approach.

"That's true, Homura-chan. I'm glad you understand that it's important now!" Madoka agrees, reaching for chopsticks. Before she picks them up however, she gasps lightly, making sure to be loud enough to catch Homura's attention.

Homura is tearing open a packet of Calorie Mate and glances up in worry. "What's wrong, Madoka?"

"Ahh, I forgot to buy a drink earlier!" Madoka lies as she forms a stiff frown on her face.

"What are you talk—oof!" Sayaka is elbowed a bit too hard by Hitomi who merely gives her a disarming smile. "I mean—yeah, ow, you were too worried about whether or not the transfer student would come that you forgot all about it." Her voice is flat and it's obvious she's lying—but Homura disregards her tone because somewhere in those words, it's her fault that Madoka doesn't have something to drink.

She resolves to fix that immediately.

"I can go and buy you something," Homura says as she moves to stand. She's stopped when a surprisingly strong hand is around her thin wrist and Madoka pulls her back down to her seat.

"A-actually, Homura-chan," Madoka looks at Homura before glancing at the second unopened milk box next to her. "...Is that strawberry milk?"

Homura nods, immediately realizing that Madoka wants her drink. "Would you like this, Madoka?" Homura sets the Calorie Mate on her lap and grabs the milk box, presenting it to the smaller girl.

"Oh! But...I mean it's your lunch-I'd feel bad just taking it!"

"That's alright, I can go buy myself another one..." Homura's voice trails off as Madoka keeps her hand around her wrist, forcing her to remain sitting.

"But only the far vending machines have that—lunch will almost be over by the time you get back!"

"No need to worry, Madoka. I can just get a plain one instead."

Feeling sorry for Homura who is obviously not understanding the situation, Hitomi cuts in. "Ah, if I may make a suggestion?"

"Hmmm?" Madoka turns to Hitomi in gratitude; Sayaka is no help at all!

"Well, if Madoka-san takes some of Akemi-san's lunch, then Akemi-san should take some of Madoka-san's lunch. It'll make up for portion that Akemi-san will be missing."

"Ah! That's a great idea, Hitomi-chan!" Madoka turns to Homura with a beaming smile.

Homura nods slowly, unsure. "Well, if it's what Madoka wants...?"

"Thanks, Homura-chan!" Madoka's cheerful face immediately banishes the doubts from Homura's mind.

"It's unfortunate that Sayaka-san is so selfish to not want to share her drinks with Madoka-san," Hitomi comments as Madoka piles more than a milk box worth of food onto her container lid for Homura.

"H-hey!" Sayaka tries to sound offended—but the fact that she's now drinking what originally had been Madoka's bottle of tea keeps Hitomi from feeling guilty at singling her out.

"M-Madoka, that's too much—" Homura protests as she's given half of Madoka's bentou.

"Don't mind, Homura-chan!"

/

Homura slowly eats her 'portion' as the other three girls continue their conversation about last night's drama. Homura only really knows about the TV show due to her repeated timelines and how often the other girls chat about it during lunch. Somehow though, she still retains clear memories about every episode. She also knows that they're going to be disappointed with what happens to the main characters in two weeks. A small part of her wonders how the series ends—the finale is supposed to be shown after Walpurgisnacht and well, it's just another one of those things that Homura has on her list of 'things to see or do after Walpurgisnacht is defeated.'

Which, is actually a pretty big list.

Madoka's attempts at including her fall flat, but Homura doesn't look at all uncomfortable just sitting there eating as the other three are talking.

As Madoka laughs at Sayaka's impression of one of the main love interests, she chances a glance at Homura's lunch and smiles wider when she notices that the girl is almost done eating. In fact, there's only two pieces of karaage left on the lid.

Either Homura doesn't like karaage, or...

Before Madoka can ask her, Sayaka reaches over and plucks the biggest piece of karaage with her chopsticks and stuffs it in her mouth.

"Ahh, your dad really makes great karaage, Madoka!" Sayaka chews, swallows and then points her chopsticks at Homura, ignoring the frown Hitomi throws her way at her bad

manners. "There's gotta be something wrong with you if you don't like it, transfer student!"

Madoka watches Homura, noticing the tightening of her grip on the fork Madoka had lent her and the barely visible frown on Homura's lips. The emotion disappears though in a flash and Madoka blinks, wondering if she had imagined it all.

Homura holds out the last piece of karaage to Sayaka. "You can have it."

"Sure," Sayaka finishes it off and Homura hands the lid back to Madoka.

"Thank you, Madoka. Your father is very talented at cooking," Homura states as she reaches for her almost empty milk box.

"Aah, thanks, Homura-chan. I'll be sure to tell him that!"

The hollow bubbly sound of Homura reaching the end of her drink is her only reply which is then followed by the chime of the school bell.

Lunch is finally over.

/

After school, Hitomi is briefly introduced to Tomoe Mami before she excuses herself for her flower arrangement class. The four of them then head towards a nearby cafe, where they will wait for the sun to lower before starting their search for a witch.

The cafe is a quiet establishment with seated booths and they settle into one with Madoka and Sayaka on one side while Mami and Homura sit across. The decor is filled with wood work, giving it a quaint atmosphere and is definitely not as modernized as the mall's food court.

Recommendations from Mami are mulled over and once their orders are filled, Mami turns an expectant eye towards her would be proteges; Homura knows underneath that calm exterior, Mami is brimming with excitement.

"So, have you two thought more about your wishes?" the blonde asks them, words neutral enough that any eavesdroppers would think nothing more of their simple, schoolgirl conversation.

"I-I'm still not sure," Madoka admits as she fidgets with the napkin from her place setting. "I mean, there's nothing that I really want right now...I'm happy," she says with a helpless shrug.

Mami nods in understanding and turns to Sayaka.

"W-well, actually...I was wondering if a wish had to be for myself...?" Sayaka asks softly.

"Ah," Mami draws in a breath and then shakes her head. "No," she answers and Sayaka almost looks excited but Mami holds out her hand to stop her. "But, I wouldn't recommend wishing for something for someone else. Those kinds of wishes don't usually end well."

"Oh," Sayaka deflates and Madoka glances at her best friend in worry.

"Kamijou-kun?" Madoka questions and the way Sayaka's hands tighten into fists is a clear enough answer.

"The question you must ask yourself," Mami continues, "is whether you want to help them, because you want to, or because you want to help them for your own selfish reasons."

Sayaka almost gasps and raises her head to look at the older girl. "O-Of course I want to help him! It's not fair that something like that happened to him—someone like that—his talents are worth more than my own!"

Mami tries to placate her with a smile. "I can understand your feelings, Miki-san, but trust me when I say that this is something you must really think over. The consequences..." her voice trails off and leave the other two wondering what happens when a wish backfires on the wisher.

Homura is silent throughout the exchange, listening with only half an ear because she knows that Sayaka's going to make that wish anyways. She's eagerly waiting for their food to arrive, wanting something else to do other than tearing off pieces of her own napkin and rolling them into little balls.

Madoka glances at her, not at all surprised at Homura's hands-off approach; the girl had remained mostly quiet during Mami's (and Kyuubey's) teachings yesterday. Briefly, Madoka wonders what kind of wish she had made.

Mami decides to break the tense atmosphere by telling them her usually strategies and the process she uses to find witches in the city.

The food arrives shortly after. Homura and Madoka split a tuna sandwich that Homura looks almost excited to eat. Sayaka digs into her own half meal of chowder and a grilled cheese sandwich and to no one's surprise, Mami calmly sips her cup of royal tea that's paired with a small slice of cheesecake.

Eventually, their conversation turns to normal, non-magical things. Mami feels hope swell in her heart as the loneliness that surrounds her is drowned out by these bright, young faces.

Once the food is gone and their stomachs content, Sayaka suddenly hits her fist to her open hand as she remembers something.

"Oh yeah! Mami-san, I forgot to show you!" To everyone's surprise, Sayaka is suddenly brandishing a wooden baseball bat and looking proud even as some of the customers in the cafe look at her strangely. "I brought this! I'm ready to take on any witch any day!"

Mami can't help but giggle and smile at Sayaka's enthusiasm while Madoka blushes and tries to get Sayaka to sit down. Homura's wondering if that is Sayaka's own personal bat or if she had borrowed it from the school; she remembers that the boys in their class had played baseball during P.E. today.

"What about you, Madoka?" Sayaka asks her as she finally takes her seat. "Did you bring anything?"

Madoka shakes her head in disappointment. She's about to apologize but she suddenly turns to her bag and starts digging through the contents.

"I didn't..." Madoka tells them as they watch her search for something, "but... I did prepare this!" she says as she pulls out a pink notebook. Mami and Sayaka help push the dishware off to the side to clear space. Once that is done, Madoka places her book into the middle of the table and flips through a few pages until she stops at the one she wants.

Mami and Sayaka blink and their booth is suddenly filled with laughter that carries across the room.

"You got me beat, Madoka!" Sayaka says as she wipes tears from her eyes.

Madoka's notebook is filled with drawings—sketches, really—of all four of them in magical costumes. The largest drawing on the page is of herself, in a poofy styled pink dress.

While Sayaka laughs and Mami smiles at Madoka's childish drawings, Homura's face remains passive but inside she's surprised. Other than Mami's costume, which they saw yesterday, the costumes that Homura, Sayaka and Madoka are all drawn in are exact copies of what their real counterparts would be.

Perhaps... somehow, somewhere, Madoka still retained memories of her past...?

\\

With her soul gem held out in front, Mami leads the way as they search for one of the witches within the city. All three are silent with Mami giving them occasional encouraging smiles, Sayaka gripping her bat tightly and Madoka clutching onto Sayaka's arm in fear as they walk behind Mami. Homura is following but falling behind. Her thoughts are elsewhere as she wonders just how much Madoka, or anyone really, remembers of their previous lifetimes.

Maybe they all had suppressed memories hidden away in their minds. It could explain why Madoka is still so nice to her, why Sayaka is always so suspicious of her. Why Mami still tries to play her part as her 'senpai' and why Kyouko is always the first to ally with her regardless of her intentions.

A sudden spike of magical static interrupts her thoughts and Homura forces her ears and tail back in as she realizes they're close to finding whoever was kissed by a witch in this timeline.

A few moments later, they see her: a business woman who's ready to jump from an abandoned building. Homura hangs back as Mami transforms and catches the woman with her ribbons while Sayaka and Madoka look on in fear.

"It's a Witch's Kiss," Mami explains as she sets the unconscious woman onto the floor. "See this mark on her neck? This shows up when humans are influenced by a witch. The victim is then cast into despair, where they either commit suicide or turn their anger onto others. You can understand why it's important for someone to fight the witches."

Sayaka nods and tightens her grip on the bat. Madoka merely grips Sayaka tighter. She understands, but it doesn't mean that she isn't afraid.

They watch as Mami does something to the mark and suddenly the woman is groggily waking up.

"W-what happened...?" she asks, obviously confused.

"We were walking by when you suddenly collapsed, stating that you felt dizzy. Perhaps you should go home and rest?" Mami answers and the woman nods slowly.

"Y-yes, I should...go home..." she murmurs to herself.

"Will you be alright by yourself?" Mami questions, wondering if maybe one of them should escort her.

"Yes, I feel better now," the woman says, sounding almost offended as she detaches herself from Mami's grasp.

They watch as she stumbles a bit as she walks past Homura, heading down the same path the girls had come from.

Sayaka frowns after her. "She doesn't have to be so ungrateful."

Mami merely gives a knowing smile. "It's a thankless job, Miki-san." She turns to regard Homura who, for some reason, is a good distance away. Mami wonders if she's scared. "Akemi-san, perhaps it'll be good for you to transform as well. The witch is never far away from its victims and this will be a good experience for you as well. Don't worry, I'll be here and Miki-san and Kaname-san are here as well."

Homura blinks at Mami's words and almost scowls when she realizes that Mami thinks she's afraid of witches.

Then again, Mami is half right. Homura is indeed afraid, but not for the reasons that Mami thinks.

Homura sighs, already anticipating their reaction.

Knowing the three are watching, Homura summons her magic and there's a flash of light as it washes over her thin frame. Instead of her school uniform, she's now dressed in a white and purple outfit. Madoka's eyes widen as she realizes it looks like what she drawn earlier in her notebook.

Mami and Sayaka too, are surprised. They disregard Homura's outfit however, and are merely gaping at the two black cat ears on top of Homura's head and the black tail that is flickering around in nervousness.

"Bwuh?" Sayaka says intelligently. She knew the transfer student was weird but...

Homura flicks her hair behind her and walks closer to the still silent trio.

"Ah," Madoka finally notices the ears and tail that have Sayaka and Mami stunned. It might be the reflections from the now setting sun, but she's sure that there's a small blush dusting Homura's cheeks even as she remains stoned face.

In other words: the girl is slowly digging herself further into Madoka's heart and those adorable cat ears take the cake.

"Shouldn't we catch that witch, Tomoe-san," Homura drawls out and the blonde starts in surprise.

Mami coughs lightly into her hand and then gives Homura a smile. "A-ah, yes, Akemi-san, we...we should destroy the witch as soon as possible. Who knows how many others were kissed?"

Sayaka has never been one with much tact and she can't ignore something like this.

"W-what are you? Some kind of cosplay freak?" Sayaka says and Homura's not sure why she looks angry. "Is this how you want to make sure people remember you, transfer student? Is this moe!? Is it!?"

Homura's ears twitch in annoyance. "It's... part of my magic," Homura merely replies. Sayaka ignores her and steps closer to Homura, squinting and staring intensely at the black ears and tail.

Before Madoka can tug Sayaka away, she's suddenly standing behind Homura and grabs her black tail.

"What are you—!"

Homura's high pitched scream echoes throughout the empty building and her ears stand up straight as Sayaka uses her above-average strength to pull at Homura's tail.

"Ah," she lets go in surprise. Homura jumps away from her, whirling around and reaching behind to rub at her tailbone.

"Wha..why..." Homura has tears in her eyes as she grits her teeth in pain.

"H-Homura-chan!" Madoka rushes over to her in worry and gives Sayaka a disappointed look.

"S-sorry... I thought... it was fake...?" Sayaka says, still in shock that the tail is obviously very attached, and very real.

"Akemi-san... are you alright?" Mami bends down to assess the now crouching girl.

"Y-yes...just... give me a minute..." Homura replies as she swipes at her eyes with her white sleeve.

"Ahh," Madoka nervously looks around, wanting to comfort Homura but not knowing how. Not thinking clearly, she glances at Homura's ears that are now flat against her head. It makes her recall a stray cat that used to hang out around Sayaka's house when they were younger. It had worked then...

Without warning, she reaches over and Homura blinks when she feels hands on top of head.

"There, there," Madoka says softly as she continues to pet Homura, noting absently that Homura's hair and ears are super soft. "Sayaka-chan didn't mean to hurt you, Homura-chan," pink eyes glare at the guilty looking girl who almost looks offended before she deflates under that piercing stare. "You should apologize, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka wants to point out that she kinda already did, but then Mami's staring and watching her too and she sighs.

"Y-yeah," Sayaka scratches the back of her head and gives Homura a sheepish smile. "I'm really sorry, transfer student. I really didn't mean to hurt you. I-I'll make it up to you! Buy you some milk as an apology!" The last part had been improvisation but she hadn't expected Homura's ears to suddenly perk up at the mention on milk.

"...how much milk?" Homura asks as she lifts her head to look at Sayaka.

"Ahh," Sayaka shrugs, glances at Madoka who's still watching and then laughs nervously. "Uhm... as much as you want until you forgive me?"

Madoka nods in approval and with great difficulty, brushes her hand one last time across Homura's ears before she pulls away.

"Are you okay now, Homura-chan?"

"Y-yes, thank you, Madoka," Homura states before shaking her head slightly, flicking her ears at the sudden loss of warmth.

"Miki-san didn't do any permanent damage did she?" Mami asks worriedly and Homura shakes her head again, this time in disagreement.

"No...it's.. not a real physical attachment," Homura explains as she stands up, Madoka helping her and Mami straightening up along with them. "It's...a manifestation of my magic, so, it was more like she was trying to pull that away from me."

"Hmmm," Mami regards her curiously, wondering how that worked.

/So this must be the reason your magic seems different than Mami's, Akemi Homura/ a familiar voice echoes in their heads and Homura resists the urge from hissing at the white Incubator. /Although, I don't see the advantages for having physical manifestations of your magic visible on your body. What good could you gain from them?/ Kyuubey sounds curious and Homura shrugs.

"I'm not sure," Homura lies and she brushes imaginary dust from the shield attached to her left arm. "So far, the only thing they're really good for is that they can detect magic a bit better than just by using my soul gem. And, that it makes me fast."

/Curious/ Kyuubey states and then turns to Mami. /Regardless, there's still a witch that needs to be killed. I've been tracking her movements and three other people have been kissed by her/

"We should hurry then." Mami states. "Kyuubey, since you know where she is lead us to her!"

/Sure, Mami!/

\\\

Holding out her now enchanted baseball bat, Sayaka gives a test swing and is satisfied the weight is still the same in her hands.

"Yeah! I can take on any witch with this! Come at me!"

"S-Sayaka-chan," Madoka is worried about Sayaka's enthusiasm but Mami gives her a wink, letting her know that no harm will come between them.

"Oh yeah, by the way, what kind of weapon do you have, transfer student?" Sayaka asks. She turns to Homura who is walking besides Madoka, putting the smaller girl in between her and Sayaka. "Is that thing for throwing?" Sayaka points to her shield and Homura tilts her head.

"No, why would you think that? This is a normal shield that can negate magical powers."

"Oh." That sounded...boring. "So... do you grow like, super long claws or something then?" That sounded plausible.

Homura blinks and Sayaka briefly imagines wiping the blank face from Homura's face with her bat.

"Miki Sayaka... I think you may watch too much anime."

Madoka giggles lightly at Homura's delivery and Sayaka throws her look of betrayal.

"I'm curious as well, Akemi-san," Mami interrupts. They turn to the other magical girl who's half turned and keeping an eye out for any stray familiars. "What kind of powers do you have? It completely slipped my mind earlier, but knowing what you can do will help us work better together."

Homura nods in agreement. "I use firearms, similar to yourself," Homura states as she reaches behind her shield and pulls out a very real looking gun.

"Whoa!" Sayaka immediately backs away from her, grabbing Madoka along with her and holds out the bat towards the now armed girl. "I-Is that real!?"

"Yes," Homura says and because Madoka looks nervous, she slips the gun back into her shield and holds out her empty hands to ease their worries. "Unlike Tomoe-san, my powers manifested into my shield and I have no offensive powers of my own. To make up for that, I acquired some equipment. I also have bombs," she adds in, more for Mami's benefit than Sayaka's.

"I...see," Mami says hesitantly. Mami has no doubts that Homura has acquired these things illegally, but she's smart enough to turn a blind eye; they are killing witches to save people. That has to be enough payment to whoever Homura had stolen the guns from.

Sayaka's face, however, twists as she realizes the implications. "Wait, how did you get them? And—and—where did you get them from!?"

Their conversation is halted however, by Kyuubey's voice.

/It's here!/

"Miki-san, Kaname-san, please stay back," Mami tells them and they immediately move closer together. "Akemi-san, please take care of these two. Don't worry, it'll be over soon."

Homura ignores the disgusted face Sayaka throws at her as she pulls out another gun from her shield.

'Reality is not all black and white, Miki Sayaka,' is all Homura can think before she turns her attention towards two familiars that have noticed them. 'You could never realize that in the previous timelines, so tell me, will you for this one?'

Two bullets and the familiars are dead.

\\

"Sayaka-chan?" Madoka glances to her childhood friend, disturbed by the uncharacteristic silence the normally upbeat girl exudes.

The two are making their way home after Mami had killed the last witch. Mami and Homura are still patrolling but Sayaka had decided to call it a night and Madoka had followed after her.

"Ahhh!" Sayaka growls in frustration. "I know—she says she's using them to kill witches, but Madoka!" She turns to look at the smaller girl. "What's stopping her from using it on people? I-I mean, those are real guns—real guns that we hear on the news and that people use to kill other people!"

Madoka holds out her hands and glances around nervously. The streets are empty since it's already night, but talking about guns out loud doesn't seem like a smart thing to do.

"I...I trust Homura-chan, Sayaka-chan," Madoka says softly. She doesn't know why, but she does. "And, what difference does it make between her weapons and Mami-san's? She has guns—rifles even, not to mention that really huge one, Tiro Finale."

That was true. Why did Sayaka feel she could trust Mami waving magical guns around while Homura's own steel ones made her blood run cold?

"...she obviously stole them, Madoka," Sayaka presses on. "She illegally stole guns from who knows where. And who knows what else she has in that magical shield of hers; for all we know she could be some kind of klepto terrorist! She's supposed to be a magical girl! A hero, like Mami-san, taking down witches, defeating evil and saving the day! Magical girls aren't thieves that use real guns and bombs that could destroy cities!

Madoka sighs and tries to push down the mounting frustration that's creeping up; this is one of the traits of Sayaka's that she dislikes.

"Sayaka-chan," Madoka looks at her seriously. "I trust Homura-chan," she repeats firmly. "And don't forget that you still owe her milk."

Sayaka shakes her head in annoyance. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Figures that Madoka would take her side. A couple days and suddenly Homura is her new best friend. "Listen, I'm gonna split off from here, alright?"

"W-wai—"

Before Madoka can reply, Sayaka is walking away from her, using her longer legs as an advantage. Madoka knows better than to try and run after her. She sighs out and nervously looks around when she realizes that the streets are pretty quiet and empty.

Also knowing about the existence of witches doesn't cease her worries. Madoka's debating whether to start running home when she hears something on the side of the road and she freezes.

"H-hello?" she squeaks out and hopes it's not a familiar.

"Meow."

Madoka blinks as a small, grey kitty steps from behind a pair of bushes and stares at her.

"Hi," Madoka coos at the feline, her fears abated as she's suddenly reminded of Homura.

"Meow," the cat replies and approaches Madoka curiously.

"Would you like to keep me company as I walk home?" Madoka asks jokingly.

To her surprise, the cat leaps towards her and Madoka catches it in her arms. "I guess that's a yes?"

"Meow."

/

"I still say that we should've let Kyuubey follow them on their way home—just in case," Mami states as she walks slightly ahead of Homura. For some reason the girl seems more agitated when Kyuubey is nearby. Mami wonders if it's because of some kind of animal instinct...?

"It's fine," Homura says as she brushes her hair back. "They live in a fairly good neighborhood. As long as they make no detours they shouldn't run into any problems." Homura would know; Homura did in fact know. "Besides," she says after a short pause, "I have someone looking after them."

(Or more like looking out for Madoka.)

"Oh?" Mami looks back at her curiously. Homura remains silent and Mami knows she's not getting an answer any time soon. "Very well." She lets the subject drop.

Homura feels her ears twitch and calls out to Mami. "There's a barrier this way," she nods to the side. "Seems a bit too weak to be a witch though."

The question hangs in the air and Mami realizes that Homura's letting Mami make the final decision.

During their earlier fight, Mami's earlier assumptions of Homura being inexperienced and scared were quickly refuted. The girl had handled the situation like a pro, picking off familiars with ease. Mami has a feeling that Homura can take any witch on single-handed if she had wanted to. It should've made Mami suspicious due to how Homura had hid during their first encounter but, thinking back to how Homura had acted when she had transformed, the girl had most likely lied due to her... additional traits.

It's obvious that Homura has had bad encounters with other people who couldn't handle her ears or tail. Like Sayaka. Mami feels honored that Homura, who really doesn't need her help, is letting her take leadership.

She's acknowledging that this city is Mami's. That they're partners.

It makes Mami's heart swell.

"Alright, Akemi-san! Tonight you learn how Tomoe Mami protects Mitakihara!"

She looks psyched and pumped up for reasons unknown. Homura nods slowly.

Kyuubey tilts his head at Mami. Humans really are strange creature**s**.

Chapter 4: goodbye

AN: slight spoiler that isn't really a spoiler because most fans should? know about the identities of witches by now.
and Drinkie, you guessed correctly !

As they make their way to school, Hitomi can't help but wonder what had happened yesterday between Sayaka and Madoka after she had left. She can feel a tenseness between them and knows it has to be something big.

/Sayaka-chan/

/I'm still thinking about it/ Sayaka merely tells her before concentrating on her discussion with Hitomi.

Changing gears, Madoka decides to instead converse with Kyuubey.

/How many more witches did Mami-san and Homura-chan hunt after we left, Kyuubey?/

/Mami and Homura found two more familiars and then split up/ Kyuubey replies. /Mami went home and Homura hunted two more/

"Eh?" In her surprise, Madoka forgets the mental link and Hitomi and Sayaka turn to her.

"Madoka-san?" Hitomi looks at Madoka in confusion.

"Ahh, I forgot to finish my homework," Madoka laughs nervously as she rubs the back of her head sheepishly.

"Oh dear, that's not good, Madoka-san," Hitomi reprimands her with a stern frown. "There's a test coming up soon and considering your scores on the previous one, you should be doing the work more seriously!"

"Ehehe," Madoka tries to laugh it off. Luckily for her, Hitomi suddenly turns to Sayaka who eeps in surprise.

"Sayaka-san! Your scores are just as bad, if not worse than Madoka-san's! You two really need to start getting your act together! Next year we will have to take the entrance exams for high school!"

"Ahh," Sayaka sighs and there's a look passed between her and Madoka. For a moment, Sayaka is Sayaka again and she gives Madoka a grin. But then, she remembers that she's still mad (at who?) and she immediately looks away.

Madoka shakes her head and tunes out Hitomi as the taller girl continues berating them on their abysmal grades. She can't wait to get to school if only to avoid this awkward atmosphere.

Once they reach the classroom, they say their good mornings to the students already in class. Madoka takes note that Homura isn't here yet. Hitomi quickly tells Madoka to show her her homework and that she'll help her finish whatever she couldn't yesterday. For once, Madoka is glad that she's horrible at math, and that she actually has two unfinished problems from the assignment.

While those two concentrate on exponentials and things that Sayaka doesn't even want to think about, Sayaka calls out to Mami; she has a real reason to distrust Homura and the older girl has a right to know.

/Mami-san!/

Madoka glances over to Sayaka briefly; she is linked in the conversation as well.

/Morning, Miki-san/

/Ah, uhm, good morning! Anyways, I need to talk to you about something! It's about the transfer student!/

/Akemi-san? Is there something wrong with her?/

/N-no! Well, yes! I guess there is! Kyuubey was telling us that she went hunting for witches by herself even though you went home! She's obviously using you and trying to keep the grief seeds to herself!/

/...Hasn't anyone ever told you it's wrong to talk about someone behind their back?/ a familiar voice interrupts and Madoka barely keeps herself from gasping out loud in surprise. /Not to mention what it says about a person who spreads rumors without knowing the situation/

"No, Madoka-san, you're supposed to multiply here and here, like this," Hitomi adds in.

"Ehehe, I see, Hitomi-chan!" Madoka quickly erases her mistake, mind concentrating on more important things than math.

/What! When did you get here?/ Sayaka asks as she looks around. Homura is nowhere to be found.

/..You do remember Kyuubey saying that he could project his telepathic link within a certain distance don't you? That includes the entrance of the school/

No, Sayaka did not remember but Homura didn't need to know that.

/A-Anyways! Explain yourself, transfer student! Admit that you want to steal the town from Mami-san and keep all the grief seeds to yourself! That's also why you kept the one Mami-san threw at you the other day! I didn't see you use it, meaning you didn't need it, meaning you only kept it because you're being greedy!/

Homura remains quiet.

/Ha! I knew it!/

Mami's clear voice is suddenly echoing in their minds.

/You're wrong Miki-san/ and they can hear a twinge of regret in Mami's voice. /She had my permission, though she didn't really need to ask. I am responsible for this town, yes, but there are enough witches around that there's no need to fight for territory, especially when Akemi-san is willing to work together with me. I'm embarrassed to admit this, but it was getting late and after hunting one witch and two familiars, I was getting tired and I still had my homework to finish. Akemi-san volunteered to go after the two witches that were being fairly active and she convinced me that she would be alright. She dropped by my apartment this morning, offering up the one grief seed that she earned by herself, last night./

Mami pauses, letting that sink in before continuing.

/Also, the grief seed I gave her was a sign of alliance between Akemi-san and I. I gave it to her because I wanted to and I had no need for it as well/

Sayaka feels her stomach drop. She realizes that she's been trying her hardest to find something wrong Homura that she's even resorting to petty assumptions.

She swallows heavily, lowering her head to avoid looking at Madoka.

/I assume that clears things up then/ Homura comments as she steps into the classroom. /Thank you, Tomoe-san/

/Yes, of course, Akemi-san. I will leave you three alone for now/

/Uhm, bye, Mami-san/ Madoka barely remembers to chime in before the link is cut off.

"Good morning, Madoka, Shizuki-san," Homura says as she passes them.

"Good morning, Akemi-san."

"M-Morning, Homura-chan!"

Sayaka keeps her head down, this time to avoid Homura's stare. She remains this way all through her classes until the school bell rings, signaling the start of lunch.

Madoka's attempts at getting Sayaka to talk to her via telepathy are once again ignored. Before Madoka can confront her, Sayaka's the first out the door.

She sighs.

"Did something happen between you two, Madoka-san?" Hitomi inquires as she walks to Madoka's desk with her bentou in hand.

"Mm, kind of," Madoka shrugs helplessly and looks over as Homura approaches. She notices the plastic bag the other girl is carrying and frowns. She has a feeling that she won't like what Homura's definition of a balanced meal is. "Homura-chan, is that your lunch?"

Homura nods and blinks when Madoka holds out her hand. "Madoka...?"

"Let me see it," Madoka tells her.

Homura complies, holding out the plastic bag obediently.

"..."

"Oh, Akemi-san," Hitomi shakes her head as Madoka is rendered speechless by what she sees inside.

"Homura-chan..."

Homura doesn't understand what's wrong. "Y-yes?"

Except that it seems like Madoka doesn't like the onigiris she chose for her lunch.

/

Madoka lectures Homura on what a 'balanced' meal should be like for ten minutes. When they finally arrive on the rooftop, Mami is already there and to their surprise, so is Sayaka.

Madoka looks happy at seeing her best friend and runs over to greet her, dragging an almost sulky looking Homura after her.

Sayaka gives Hitomi a questioning glance. She answers by pointing to the plastic bag Homura is holding. Sayaka immediately recognizes the logo of one of the many convenience stores scattered around Mitakihara.

She chokes back a laugh and instead turns to Madoka.

"I'm sorry we're late!" Madoka apologizes and trades a look with Sayaka. They've been friends for so long that Sayaka knows that Madoka has already forgiven her for acting out of line.

She has already apologized to Mami and only has one more person to make up to.

"H-hey, transfer student," Sayaka calls out to her, forcing herself to look at Homura straight on.

Except—Homura isn't looking at her. Her gaze is instead focused on the bench behind Sayaka, where Mami is sitting with a stack of varied milk boxes occupying the seat next to her.

"Uh, I just wanted to say I'm sorry..." Sayaka trails off, annoyed. She snaps her fingers in front of Homura's face, trying to get her attention. Lavender eyes briefly meet hers before they're distracted again.

"It's fine," Homura murmurs softly, still not looking at her. "It usually happens. I'm used to it."

Sayaka looks at her in confusion, but shrugs it off as being another weird transfer student thing. "Well, in case you didn't notice, I bought drinks—for all of us," Sayaka says as she clears her throat in warning. Homura looks slightly disappointed before the emotion disappears again.

"Thanks, Sayaka-chan!" Madoka smiles at her and walks over to grab a drink.

"So..." Sayaka glances to Homura who's following after Madoka. "What's in the bag, transfer student?"

"Ah," Homura flinches, stopping her hand from reaching for a strawberry milk. She gives Madoka a nervous look.

For some reason, Sayaka is suddenly reminded of a cat looking to her owner in fear. Her earlier suppressed laugh reappears and she doubles over in laughter at the strangeness of the situation.

/

With the air now clear between them, the day continues uneventfully until it's finally after school.

Hitomi has cram school to attend and is the first one to leave. Sayaka at least waits until Mami arrives before she too excuses herself with a wave.

"She's going to visit Kamijou-kun," Madoka explains as they watch Sayaka become a small speck in the background; she's walking fast, eager to spend as much time as possible in the hospital since she had missed visiting yesterday. Usually Madoka joined her, but considering the break-neck speed Sayaka is traveling, it's no wonder Sayaka had told her she'd be fine.

"Well, shall we head back to my apartment?" Mami asks and the other two nod in confirmation. Sayaka will join them after she's done.

"Hmm? Where's Kyuubey?" Madoka blinks as she realizes the white animal isn't around anymore; he was just here a minute ago.

"...He followed after Miki Sayaka," Homura informs her.

"Ah." For some reason, Madoka suddenly feels a chill wash over her.

"Madoka?" Homura, always observant of the smaller girl notices her freeze. Before she can answer, a familiar sound greets them.

"Meow."

"Ah! It's the kitty from last night!" Madoka is immediately distracted and crouches down as the little grey cat approaches her. She holds out her hand and the cat licks it, before she scratches it behind the ears earning her a soft purr.

"Last night?" Mami asks, curious at Madoka's offhanded comment.

"Y-yeah, when we were walking home, Sayaka-chan went ahead, and then this little kitty came and escorted me home!" Madoka says as she strokes the cat's chin.

"Ahh," Mami looks over to Homura. "Is that cat an acquaintance of yours, Akemi-san?"

Homura blinks but isn't surprised when Mami puts two and two together; no one could survive being a magical girl that long without being smart.

"...Her name is Amy," Homura answers instead. She walks towards Madoka who's still playing with the cat and crouches down. "Is there something wrong, Amy?"

Madoka glances at Homura, trying to hide her amusement and failing at it.

"Meow," Amy responds and licks Madoka's hand again.

"...I'm pretty sure I left you some this morning," Homura replies.

"Meow."

"Oh?"

"Meow."

"Hmm, that is worrying."

"Meow."

"I see, thank you for telling me. I'll stop by the store tonight."

"Meow."

"Yes, I remember what brand you like."

"Meooooooooow."

"..."

"Meooooooww."

"...Fine."

"Meow."

Amy licks Madoka's hand again, rubs her face against Homura's shoe and bounds away.

"U-Uhm, Homura-chan...?" the smaller girl is staring at Homura in shock.

"Yes, Madoka?" Homura's face is blank as she turns to face her.

"Y-You can understand her...?"

Homura realizes how crazy she must've looked. She flicks her hair back. "...Yes."

"A-ah," Mami comments off to the side. "How interesting..."

Even with dealing with magic and witches, some things still managed to surprise her even after all this time.

/

An hour later, the girls are now in Mami's apartment. Homura is in the middle of helping Madoka with her homework while Mami works on her own when Madoka's phone suddenly rings.

The jarring ringtone shatters the peaceful atmosphere and Madoka fumbles in her bag for her phone.

"Ah! Sorry! It's Sayaka-chan!" Madoka states as an explanation and notices absently that Homura's ears have popped up before she picks up.

"Saya-"

"Madoka! Hurry! You gotta bring Mami-san and the transfer student over here!"

"Wait, wait! What's wrong, Sayaka-chan?" Madoka tries to calm her down. Mami and Homura are now looking at her.

"There's a witch's egg or whatever, hatching at the hospital! Kyuubey says there's still time but who knows what'll happen if we wait too long!"

"O-Okay! We're on our way, Sayaka-chan! Just wai-"

"Anyways, I'm gonna go into the barrier with Kyuubey so that we can find the witch easier! Kyuubey should be able to link us up when you're close enough! So hurry up!"

"Wait-"

Click

beeeeeeeeeeeeeep

"Sayaka-chan!? Sayaka-chan!"

"We should hurry, Kaname-san," Mami says as she gets up.

"Y-yeah," Madoka breathes out. She glances over just in time to see the ears and tail disappear from Homura's body.

"She never really thinks clearly if that boy's involved, does she?" Homura asks rhetorically.

Mami gives her a sad smile. "Love makes people do stupid things..."

Homura merely shakes her head and starts heading towards the door.

/

"They should hire a better decorator," Sayaka jokes as she nervously looks around. Like the last two witch's barriers that she's been in, the area around them is filled with clashing color schemes and scenery that makes Sayaka think she's dreaming.

It's only her and Kyuubey in this world so far. The sound her echoing footsteps make is doing nothing to cease her fears and she wishes, but not enough to make a contract, that she had at least thought to bring something with her as a weapon. As it stands, the only thing she has is her school bag and she's not exactly sure how her math book, though heavy, is going to protect her from a witch.

"So, you're sure we're going the right way?" Sayaka has no reasons to doubt Kyuubey, she only has a reason to fill the tense silence.

/Yes. We are heading in the correct direction. The witch is still sleeping but even then it's easy to pinpoint the largest concentration of despair within the barrier/

"I-I see. That's good then," Sayaka nods. "Do you know if Madoka and Mami-san are nearby yet?"

/Taking into account the slowest member of their team and the distance from Mami's house to the hospital, it will still be ten minutes until they arrive./

"What about the witch? I mean," Sayaka gestures to the walls around them, "I-Is it going to wake up soon? Like, before they get here?"

/Considering the activity of magic inside the barrier, I would say it's a very close race. It would be easier if you merely decided on your wish and destroyed the witch before it can fully form./

"Heh. Be a hero, or I guess a heroine, huh?" Sayaka replies instead as she grips her bag closer. "I-I would love to. But, I can't-at least, not yet."

/I don't understand your reasoning. I can detect that you have strong feelings and that there's a strong wish hiding inside you, but for some reason you are stopping yourself. May I ask why?/

"Why…?" Sayaka says softly and slows down until she finally stops walking.

/Yes/

Sayaka turns to regard the white creature on her shoulders and she can see red eyes staring back. There's no curiosity there, just a stare.

Sayaka looks away.

"Because I don't deserve to be one," she admits and Kyuubey tilts his head at her.

/I don't understand./

Here, Sayaka laughs. "That's alright, I don't understand it myself either. But, I can't become a heroine. At least… not until…" her voice trails off.

/Hm. Peculiar. Regardless, the witch seems to be growing more active. It won't be long now until it will hatch./

"And Mami-san?"

/Still not within my range./

"I see."

Steeling her eyes, Sayaka looks down the corridor with determination. If push comes to shove, she will make that wish, but if, and only then.

"Let's get closer. Which way, Kyuubey?"

/Turn here/

"'Kay."

/

As Madoka stares at the strange black pulsating grief seed, she shudders as she feels the waves of evil emanating off of it.

"You don't have to come along," Homura tells her as she watches Mami open the barrier with her magic.

Madoka jumps lightly in surprise. "E-eh?"

Homura merely gestures to Madoka's hands. She looks down and sees that they're shaking.

Mami is hesitant but agrees. "It's alright to be scared. You can just sit this one out; we'll be back soon."

Madoka can't help it; her knees are shaking and she *is* scared.

"Please, let me come along..." she whispers. For some reason, she doesn't want to be left behind. She feels safer with them, with Homura, than she does by herself.

Homura and Mami exchange a look.

Homura nods. "Don't worry, Madoka, I'll protect you."

Madoka doesn't know why, but she feels like she has heard those words before. She finds that somehow, she still believes in them.

"Thank you, Homura-chan," she murmurs softly.

"Alright, let's go, girls," Mami tells them, taking point as she steps into the barrier first.

Homura holds out her hand to Madoka. "Let's go, Madoka."

Madoka nods, not at all hesitating to take Homura's outstretched hand into her own. She finds comfort in that warmth, and a strange familiarity that rises from within.

Homura enters first and Madoka is pulled in after.

\\

Standing on the edge of the epicenter of the witch's maze, Sayaka's eyes are unconsciously drawn to the black swirl of despair that is churning and convulsing; the signs that the witch is about to hatch from the dredges of darkness.

Mami and Madoka and Homura are on their way, but Sayaka remains captivated, unable to move as she is hypnotized by the swirl that is slowly turning into a dark

vortex. She, a mere human playing a Witch's game, is suddenly thrown off balance as the final restraint breaks. She lands on her back, eyes wide as the world churns and churns and warp into high platforms of various heights before her very eyes.

The background fills itself with bright candy colours. Sayaka sits up, staring at the almost innocent scenery that is nothing like what she associates a witch's barrier to be.

"What is this?" she whispers.

/Sayaka! Quick! It's hatching! You need to make your wish now!/

"That won't be necessary," a voice cuts in and suddenly Homura is there, kneeling besides Sayaka and carrying Madoka in her arms. She lowers Madoka to the floor and the smaller girl immediately reaches for Sayaka, throwing her arms around her.

"Sayaka-chan! Are you okay!"

"M-Madoka?"

A burst of wind whips their hair around and they turn as the witch suddenly appears. Black and oblong, a large, worm shaped beast with a face that reminds Sayaka of clowns she had seen as a kid. A circus act befitting of the childlike atmosphere around then.

"That's the witch?" Sayaka asks, disbelief in her voice because it seems harmless; not witch like at all.

"Do not underestimate it," Homura warns them as she pulls out a gun. Sayaka cringes at the sight.

"Don't worry! Something like this will be a piece of cake!" a familiar voice cries out from above.

All heads turn and they watch as Mami leaps over them. Her yellow ribbons are wrapped like a trapeze and she, the main performer. She swings across with her ever trusty muskets in hand. She aims and fires at the newly hatched witch, yellow bullets dotting the black body with continuous shots.

Homura remains with Madoka and Sayaka, protecting them and keeping out of Mami's way. With half her attention on Mami, and half on the familiars, it isn't too long until Homura spots the signs; the witch is getting angry, and Mami is getting careless.

To Sayaka and Madoka, Mami is an experienced warrior. They are awestruck and Homura knows that the blonde is inspiring, influencing their decision to become magical girls.

It never ceases to annoy her and she grits her teeth angrily.

"She's going to get herself killed," Homura says suddenly. Madoka and Sayaka turn to her in surprise.

"Wha-" Sayaka is cut off when Homura grabs her hand and presses something cold and hard into her palm.

Eyes widen when she realizes what it is. Sayaka wants to throw the gun away as far as possible-but Homura's grip keeps her from doing so.

"It's only just in case," Homura tells her as she tilts the gun, showing her the little tab at the side. "The safety's on; you'll need to push this for it to work. There's only eight bullets in here too. Remember that."

"W-What are you-"

Homura glances suddenly to her side and Sayaka instinctively follows the movement.

Madoka.

"A-Alright," Sayaka swallows nervously, voice cracking at the sudden pressure she feels.

"H-Homura-chan?" Madoka looks at Homura, hand automatically reaching for her.

Homura takes it before squeezing it gently. "I'll be back," she nods to Sayaka. "Protect her, Miki Sayaka."

"Y-Yeah!" Sayaka's voice is stronger this time.

Homura glances at them and suddenly she's gone.

/

As Mami continues to fly through the air with her attacks, for some reason, she feels weightless. Carefree. Happy.

Something she hasn't felt in a while.

At least, not since... she stops those thoughts.

The smirk on her face grows wider as she hears the witch cry out. She doubles her efforts and her trusty rifles continue to damage and bite through the darkness with their golden light.

She knows Sayaka and Madoka and Homura are watching. Knows she needs to make up for her less than stellar performance last night. As a veteran, she should've been there with Homura, instead of sitting at home, finishing her homework. She had skimped out on her responsibility as a magical girl, and it was shameful for to let her kouhai take her spot.

"About time we wrapped this up, eh Witch-san?" Mami says as she leaps higher into the air. She concentrates on her ribbons, visualizing and shaping her magic to form her strongest weapon in her artillery. She lands on top of the cannon that materializes underneath her. "Your time is up! Tiro Finale!"

The light released is almost blinding. Mami averts her eyes, still knowing that her aim is straight and true. As her golden magic disperses, Mami lowers herself to the ground, guns fading and her back to the destroyed witch. As she reaches up to catch the teacup, signaling the end of her attack, she suddenly hears frantic shouting. Her ears focus on the voices of Madoka and Sayaka, who are screaming at her.

"Mami-san! Above you! Above you!"

"Mami-san! LOOK OUT!"

Mami can feel the blood drain from her face as she tilts her head up, eyes looking, but not seeing the sharp and deadly set of teeth peering down at her. She vaguely notices her reflection on the teeth, showing the terror on her face. Her last thought is that she

is a bigger fool than she thought possible. Her hands miss the catch for her teacup and it falls to the ground, shattering to pieces.

"Mami-san!"

\\

Once Homura had left Madoka in Sayaka's hands, she had immediately scaled the wall, running quickly on all fours. As soon as she was close enough, she had then leaped onto the closest platform, using that as a stepping stone to continue onto the next one until she finally reached the highest platform of all. There, she had a better view of the fight and a better view of what she knew was going to happen.

She now trains her eyes on Mami, watching as the blonde smirks right before summoning her greatest attack: Tiro Finale.

Closing her eyes as Mami shouts her catch phrase, Homura counts to ten and opens them just as the brightness dims back to normal levels. She crouches, muscles tense, ears pressed and tail flickering as she waits for the right moment to intervene.

There!

In a single leap, she clears the distance and tackles Mami just as Charlotte chomps down to where the blonde once stood.

There is the sound of concrete being crushed as teeth meets floor. Further away, the speed of Homura's tackle keeps the two rolling, until they finally slide to a dizzying stop now a good distance away from the confused witch.

"A-Akemi-san?" Mami tries to gain her bearings while Homura literally shakes her head, ears twitching as she catches her breath.

Maybe she should've used her time stopping powers instead, but a small part of her thinks how fun that had been before she squashes it back down.

"Doesn't the body remind you of a caterpillar, Tomoe Mami?" Homura asks calmly as she sits back on her haunches to stare at Mami.

It's the first time Mami thinks that Homura actually resembles a cat. She stares at her for a few seconds before she realizes she should answer.

"A-ah, y-yes?"

Homura tilts her head at Mami. "Are you still okay to fight?"

The questions brings Mami back to the present. Her hair is disheveled and her clothes are scuffed from their tumble, but her eyes are suddenly burning and yes, she finds she is still okay.

Better than okay.

She's alive.

"Yes, of course," she nods in confirmation.

Homura watches as Charlotte suddenly veers towards them. "Alright, here's the plan..."

/

As the barrier continues to fade around them, Homura lands besides the grief seed and places her hand on the cold object. Instead of picking it up, she bows her head and closes her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she apologizes to Charlotte (Nagisa). She had meant to visit her tomorrow, figuring that she still had time before the girl would make her wish.

It didn't surprise Homura though, that things never went as planned. Charlotte had hatched early this time around, maybe the earliest Homura has ever seen.

So much for a perfect cycle.

Her hand closes around the grief seed and she stands just as the barrier completely disappears.

Sayaka and Madoka rush over to Mami who wills her magical costume away. The unused gun disappears from Sayaka's hands and Homura returns to her non-magical human form. She stands a bit away, watching as Mami wipes the tears from her eyes, as Madoka openly cries and Sayaka stubbornly tries to keep from sobbing in relief. Homura pockets the grief seed and turns her eyes to the now orange sky.

Even after all this time, killing witches like Charlotte (Nagisa), never really did get easie**r.**

Chapter 5: hello

AN: One of the longer chapters and entirely focused on Homura and Madoka and things that are made up.

Things are quiet as Homura escorts Madoka back home.

Sayaka has already been dropped off and once the three had returned to Mami's, Madoka and Homura had picked up their belongings before leaving as well.

Due to Homura's additional witch hunts yesterday, Kyuubey had informed them that there were no real 'active' witches out there, only familiars. With much hesitation, Mami had agreed that they should call it a night.

Nervous smiles exchanged between the two and then they bid their goodbyes.

Now, Homura is walking with Madoka while shooting her occasional worried glances. Madoka stills seems shaken up by what had almost happened to Mami.

It's been a long while since Homura has last saved Mami from her death, a long while since she's had to deal with the consequences of these kinds of *things*. She shifts through her memories, wondering how to comfort the smaller girl but comes up blank.

She realizes she doesn't even remember what that word really means.

It doesn't matter though, because Madoka's shoulders start shaking and Homura realizes that she's crying.

"M-Madoka?"

"Homuraaa-chan!" Madoka wails loudly and throws herself at the other girl.

Homura stiffens as she feels hands grip her jacket tightly.

Cries turn into sobs and Homura feels herself panicking.

A sudden memory hits Homura hard. She's reminded of a woman from long ago, one who used to hold her close when the frustrations of not being normal were too much for a child to handle.

"It's okay, Madoka," Homura says softly as she finally wraps her arms around Madoka. "It's okay. I'm here."

/

"Are you alright now?" Homura asks Madoka as she hands her a cup of hot cocoa purchased from a nearby vending machine. "Careful, it's hot."

"Y-yes, thank you," Madoka answers shyly, accepting the drink.

They're halfway to Madoka's house at this point, stopped at one of the parks that Madoka used to frequent and one her little brother still plays at often. The two are sitting side by side on one of the benches, Madoka now with a cup of hot cocoa in her hands, Homura likewise nursing her own cup.

Madoka glances at Homura briefly, face flushing slightly at the evidence of her breakdown. There's a large wet spot located around Homura's left shoulder. It seems crying for ten minutes straight can soak a jacket and shirt pretty thoroughly.

"I-I'm sorry about...that," Madoka apologizes as she gestures to Homura's uniform.

Homura shakes her head. "It's fine."

It's not the first time Madoka finds Homura's attitude about her being rather strange. For some reason, she knows that Homura really doesn't mind. Homura seems to want to run through fire and ice for her, and she can't understand why.

Why did Homura feel this way, when they only met just a few days ago...?

"We should head back once you're finished," Homura interrupts her thoughts and Madoka jumps slightly before she nods.

She sees Homura take a small sip, completely missing the girl's earlier fervent attempts at cooling the liquid, and follows her example.

"Auch!" the hot cocoa is still very hot and Madoka fumbles, moving the cup away in surprise. The paper cup slips from her clumsy fingers and suddenly Homura is standing as a cupful of hot cocoa spills onto her lap.

There's only a gasp from Homura who somehow manages to not spill her own drink.

Madoka immediately leaps to her feet. "Oh no! Homura-chan! I'm so sorry!"

"It-it's fine," Homura grits out. Madoka sees that Homura's cat ears have shown up—though this time they're pressed down as the girl tries to ignore the hot liquid burning her legs.

"Ahh, I'm so stupid!" Madoka says as she reaches into her skirt pocket to pull out her handkerchief. "I'm such a idiot," she repeats as she starts trying to pat the cocoa from Homura's uniform.

"*Don't.*"

A cold voice stops her short and she feels tears pooling in her eyes.

Of course Homura would be mad. Who wouldn't be?

To Madoka's surprise, there's a huge whiff of cocoa and suddenly, Homura is there. She rubs her head against Madoka's face, soft cat ears brushing against her cheek.

"Don't call yourself stupid," Homura says softly. "You're not stupid. It was a simple mistake. Don't worry about it."

"H-Homura-chan?" Madoka blinks slowly.

Homura pulls away quickly and retracts her cat ears and tail.

"...Perhaps we should head back now; it'll be dinner soon anyways, the cocoa would've spoiled your appetite," Homura suspiciously keeps her face turned and flicks her hair nervously behind her.

"Y-yeah..." Madoka replies dazedly.

They find that Homura's skirt and legs had absorbed most of the damage and that their bags are luckily untouched. A quick clean up at the public restroom nearby before they continue their walk back to Madoka's house.

As they turn the corner and the Kaname house comes into view, Madoka suddenly grabs the sleeve of Homura's jacket. They stop walking and Homura turns to Madoka in confusion.

"U-Uhm, Homura-chan, I'm really sorry—about—"

Homura cuts her off with a wave of her hand. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

She tries to turn away but Madoka tugs at her sleeve once more. Expecting more apologies, Homura's mouth opens to reassure her but—

"A-Actually, would you like to stay for dinner?" Madoka looks up at her shyly.

"Uhm?" Homura closes her mouth, giving Madoka a blank stare.

Sensing the opportunity, Madoka presses on. "S-See, well, if you don't wash your clothes out soon, they'll stain—and I was thinking you could wash yours while we're eating! Oh—and of course I'll lend you something to wear! Plus! Knowing you, Homura-chan, you're probably going to eat something unhealthy again!"

Homura blinks, taking a moment to process Madoka's ramblings.

Before she can reply, Madoka takes her hand and stares at her with wide eyes. "Please? As an apology for—everything?

Homura swallows nervously and finds herself unable to refuse. She nods stiffly.

Madoka grins, proud at her victory. "Thank you, Homura-chan!"

\\

"I'm home!" Madoka calls out as she takes off her shoes and lines them up neatly at the entrance. Homura follows her example, neatly placing her shoes by Madoka's, before the two of them continue into the house.

"Welcome home, Madoka! Dinner will be soon—oh, who's this?" Kaname Tomohisa regards Homura curiously and she bows in greeting.

"Welcome home, Maroka!" Madoka's little brother parrots. Madoka grins at him, poking him in the cheek before responding to her dad.

"This is my friend, Akemi Homura," Madoka says as she grabs Homura's hand. "I accidentally spilled some cocoa on her clothes," she gestures to the darkened spots on Homura's uniform, "and she lives a bit further away, so..." Madoka looks at her dad and he nods in understanding.

"Sure, you should get the clothes in the washer as soon as possible then. Go wash up, dinner will be ready in half an hour. Nice to meet you, Homura-chan."

"Nice to meet you, Kaname-san," Homura says, moving to bow once more. She is interrupted by an impatient Madoka who tugs her towards the hallway.

"Change clothes first, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, dragging her away.

"Maroka!"

"We'll be back, Takkun!" she calls out to him as she leads Homura to her room.

Tomohisa smiles at his daughter and turns back to the stove.

"Guess Madoka made another friend, eh, Takkun?"

"Kitty!" Takkun replies instead.

"Hm?" Tomohisa looks around, wondering if there was a cat around. He double checks the TV, but all that's showing is the cartoon that Takkun likes and there are currently no cats on screen.

"Kitty!"

\\

"Hmm, maybe something like this will fit you better," Madoka mutters to herself as she digs through her closet.

"Anything will be fine, Madoka," Homura assures her. Truthfully, despite her reluctance to come here, Homura did want to at least change her clothes; there is still a good amount of cocoa stuck to her tights and they're uncomfortably sticking to her legs.

"Ah," Madoka looks at her in realization. "I'm sorry I ruined your tights! I'll buy you another pair!"

Homura shakes her head. "That won't be necessary, I have more at home."

"Hmm," Madoka responds distractedly and looks Homura up and down again. Homura is taller than her—but is worrying thinner than she is. "Alright, how bout this?" She hands Homura a pink t-shirt she had bought last week, a thin pink hoodie she had purchased last year but never wore, and a pair of grey sweats that are too big and that she is hoping she'd one day (soon) grow into.

"That's fine, thank you."

If Homura is bothered by the amount of pink Madoka has in her room, she keeps her mouth shut and accepts the clothes graciously.

"Actually," Madoka glances at Homura's legs briefly, "you probably have enough time to shower before dinner," Madoka tells her.

"Ah, that's okay." She tries to decline but Madoka gives her another look and she sighs softly. "Uhm. Thank you."

"I'll get you a towel—and..." Madoka trails off and fidgets suddenly.

"Madoka?" Homura looks at her in confusion.

"Uhmm..." Madoka leans in and Homura has to keep her face flushing in embarrassment at the sudden closeness. Madoka whispers something into Homura's ear, and this time she does blush.

"I-I'm—I-don't think—it?" Homura stutters out as the tips of her ears burn.

"Ehehe, I have some new ones I bought last week as well—Uh, don't worry! I-I haven't used them but they're washed!" Madoka tries to say nonchalantly, but her cheeks are also tinged pink. "Is—uhm. Would you prefer plain, or patterned...?"

"Ahh..." Homura wants to bury herself in a hole. "P-Plain is fine..."

Madoka nods before quickly searching for what Homura needed.

"Here you go, Homura-chan," Madoka hands her the rest of her things and they both avoid eye contact. "J-just leave your clothes in the hamper by the door."

"T-thank you, Madoka," Homura stammers out. She averts her eyes and heads to the bathroom.

As soon as Madoka hears the closing of the door, she places her hands to her warm cheeks. "Calm down, myself," she says quietly to the empty room.

They are both girls, so it shouldn't be this embarrassing...

Likewise, Homura leans against the door of the bathroom and tries to calm down her full on blush.

\\

Less than ten minutes later, Madoka is in the living room playing with her little brother when Homura emerges from the bathroom. Madoka looks to her in surprise, especially when she notices that Homura's hair is also slightly damp. They both also pointedly ignore what Homura is now wearing.

"You're done already?" Madoka asks, voice full of doubt. "Did you wash properly?" Madoka is wondering if she has to lecture Homura on the aspects of hygiene as well but Homura merely nods. "Did you wash your hair too?"

"Yes, there was some cocoa in the back somehow. I hope you don't mind I used your shampoo as well."

"That's fine," Madoka says but she gives Homura a stern look. "It takes me at least fifteen minutes to shower—if I'm rushing it, and my hair is definitely shorter than yours. How did you wash and dry it in that limited amount of time?" Madoka demands.

There's a ghost of a smile on Homura's lips as she replies. "Magic."

Madoka blinks. "Eh?"

"Kitty!" Takkun shouts out, interrupting them. He moves closer to Homura. "Kitty!"

Homura and Madoka both turn to him in surprise.

Madoka blinks at her little brother. "T-Takkun?"

"Kitty!" Takkun repeats and tugs at Homura's sweater. "Lemme pet kitty!"

The two girls exchange a look. Homura crouches so that she's eye-level with the young boy.

"Kitty!" he giggles and gently ruffles the top of Homura's head.

"Ahhh, Takkun! That's no way to treat Homura-nee-chan!" Tomohisa scolds him from the kitchen.

"Kitty!" Takkun says again.

This time, Tomohisa steps away from his preparations and wipes his hands on a dishtowel. "I'm sorry, Homura-chan, it seems Takkun has new nickname for you," he apologizes.

"It's fine," Homura isn't all that bothered and Madoka giggles louder.

"Kitty! Let's play!" Takkun tugs at Homura's sleeve. He points to the low coffee table and the papers that they are drawing on.

"A-alright," Homura agrees as she stands. She lets Takkun drag her over to where Madoka is.

"Kitty," Madoka says teasingly and Homura blushes as Takkun repeats after his sister.

"Kitty!"

\\

"I'm home!" Junko Kaname calls out to her loving family, taking note of the extra pair of school loafers next to her daughter's.

"Mama! Mama!" she can hear Takkun's adorable voice calling after her.

Junko steps further inside, immediately noticing that it isn't Sayaka like she had thought. Instead, it is a dark-haired girl she has never met, dressed in clothes that she had helped her daughter pick out.

"Welcome home, Mama!" Madoka tells her.

Junko steps to the kitchen to give her husband a kiss before she turns to her two children and the mysterious guest in their house.

"And who is this?" Junko asks with smile as she bends down to intercept Takkun who is running towards her.

"Kitty!" Takkun responds.

Homura blinks while Madoka grins before standing up. Homura follows suit.

"Mama, this the transfer student I told you about, Akemi Homura!"

Ahh. Right, there had been a cool, mysterious girl that Madoka mentioned the other day.

Homura bows politely. "It's nice to meet you, Kaname-san."

"Ahh," Junko waves her hand away. "Kaname-san is what you'd call my parents! Please, call me Junko!"

Homura merely bows again. Madoka grabs her arm and bumps her hip with Homura's leg, causing her to stumble slightly.

"Madoka," her voice is soft and confused and Madoka smiles.

"Don't be so nervous, Homura-chan!"

"So, I'm assuming she's staying for dinner?" Junko asks as she looks Homura over.

"Ehehe, I hope that's okay, Mama! Papa said it was alright!" Madoka gives her mom an unsure look.

"It's fine, but please, next time at least give us a day notice," Junko tells her and Madoka nods.

"I-it was kind of last minute...sorry."

"That's alright, as long as you understand," Junko easily forgives her and Madoka brightens. "And have you informed your parents that you won't be home for dinner, Homura-chan?"

Madoka suddenly remembers that she hasn't seen Homura on the phone at all. Maybe before the shower...? She glances to Homura in worry.

"No, I haven't," Homura tells her truthfully, earning her a frown from Junko.

Junko decides that maybe her first impression of this girl isn't as good as she thought.

"Well, you should at least give them a call; I'm sure they'll be worried when their cute daughter doesn't show up for dinner!" she keeps her tone light but Madoka knows her mother is now testing Homura, trying to determine if she likes her.

Homura keeps her face blank as she debates on her actions. She's been in this situation before. Many times, in fact, and her answers always varied but generally all ended with the same conclusion that Homura lives alone. Not once has she ever told Junko or Madoka or anyone the real reason *why*.

A spark of curiosity lights within her and she wonders...

She looks at Junko straight on. "I don't think it'll affect them to know where I'm eating dinner at tonight."

Madoka has to fight the urge to grab Homura and hide her in her room. What is she doing!? Where is the sweet, little awkward Homura that Madoka is getting to know!?

Junko narrows her eyes at Homura. She walks over to her husband and hands him Takkun.

"Give us a few moments?" she asks. She gives Takkun a kiss on the cheek as Tomohisa nods and walks further into the house to give them some space.

"Now, listen here," Junko whirls on Homura as Madoka gulps fearfully. "If you would like to eat dinner here, with my daughter and my family, you will take out that phone of yours and call your parents and tell them where you are. You may think that it's none of their business, but as a mother myself, I worry when my daughter," she glances at Madoka as if reminding her of what had happened the other day, "doesn't tell me where she's at, when there's a place setting waiting for her during dinner. Do I make myself clear?"

Homura tilts her head at Junko. Only because she knows Madoka looks close to having a panic attack, does she nod and walks over to her bag.

"Actually," Junko says as Homura takes the white flip phone out, "just dial the number and I'll speak to your parents."

Madoka feels a cold sweat break out as she watches her mother and Homura interact.

"Alright," Homura flips the screen open and selects her contact list. She only has six contacts stored inside and her finger hovers as she decides whether or not to call her mom or dad.

Junko clears her throat and Homura makes a quick choice: her dad will most likely not pick up, leaving her mother the number to call.

Homura pushes the button and holds out the phone obediently. Junko takes it and places it to her ear as the phone rings.

Homura wonders if her mother will pick up—but then suddenly—

"Hello?"

The room is quiet enough that they can hear the other woman's voice on the other line. Homura's face remains passive as she hears a voice she hasn't heard in years.

"Ah, hello? Is this Akemi-san?"

"Yes, who am I speaking to?"

"Ah, good evening, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm a friend of your daughter—"

"My what?"

"Your daughter, Akemi Homura?" Junko glances to Madoka for confirmation who nods.

"My daughter?"

"Yes—your daughter," Junko agrees. "And—"

"Listen, I told the hospital that if anything happens they're supposed to contact her father."

"No—I'm not with the hospital," there's a confused look on Junko's face before she continues, "I'm a friend of your daughter's—"

"I'm a bit busy here, can you please just state what you want?"

"Yes, your—" Junko is interrupted when Homura takes the phone away from her.

"Hello, mother?"

"...H-Homura... ah... how-how are you?"

"I'm fine mother. How have you been? It's been a while since we last spoke."

Homura now has her back turned to Madoka and Junko.

"Ah...mother is also fine... is...is there something that you need?"

"No, not really. I'm just calling because I'm supposed to tell you that I'm eating dinner at a friend's right now."

"I...I see. T-That's nice dear. Is it your friend—what was her name—Chiko?"

"Chieko?"

"Y-Yeah! Chieko-chan! How is she doing?"

"Chieko wasn't my friend; she was my roommate in the hospital in Tokyo."

Madoka gives her mom a nervous look.

"Nonsense, dear! You two were as close as peas in a pod! Don't tell me you stopped talking to her just because you moved!"

"Well, I'm not sure she'll be able to get my phone calls since she died two years ago."

"A-ah... Well, it h-happens to everyone, honey. W-well, if that's all—"

"I wanted to ask you something," Homura's eyes are distant as she remembers that day. "I tried calling you when I was released from the hospital, but I guess you changed your number... I guess I didn't get the memo from the nurses."

She can still remember how devastated she was when another woman picked up the phone—and promptly hung up on her. All she does now, when she's released from the hospital after every restart, is wait for her Aunt to call her and tell her that her mother changed her phone number without telling her.

"A-ah, yeah, I'm pretty sure I left them it! N-No wonder I didn't get a call from you all that time."

Liar.

"Mm, it's a good thing Aunt Keiko had your new number, otherwise I'm not sure how I would be in contact with you."

Homura actually has the number memorized; it's one of those things that never change even during a new cycle.

"Ah... yes, well, you know that mother is a very busy woman! Have you tried calling your father then?"

She always did deflect to her father when things started going bad.

"No, I don't think he would appreciate a call during this time."

"That man! Always too busy running into another woman's arms!"

"Oh? Is he no longer dating the woman from the Tokyo branch?"

Last she had heard he was having an affair with his secretary; why her mother still hadn't divorced him was a testament to how they both still clutched onto things that Homura couldn't understand.

"They broke up months ago, Homura! He's with some jail bait hussy now—"

The phone is pulled away from Homura's hands and she turns to see Junko looking absolutely furious as she snaps the phone shut. Homura's face is blank and Madoka grabs her suddenly, hugging her hard.

"Homura-chan!"

Junko grits her teeth and closes her empty hand into a fist; how dare that woman even call herself a mother?!

Homura isn't sure what she's feeling. There's a reason she has never talked to her parents after the first timeline. She wonders just exactly what she was hoping to accomplish by making that phone call; maybe it's the same thing she's hoping when she always re-programs her mother's new phone number into her phone.

"Madoka, I think I'll go home now," Homura says as she tries to detach the smaller girl away from her.

Madoka shakes her head and grips Homura tighter. "No!"

"Madoka," Homura's voice is louder now as she tries to pull away. There's a very strong need to leave this suddenly too bright place. "I—need to leave—" Homura chokes and she knows that she should be able to push Madoka away easily, but for some reason she can't find the strength to shove her away.

Suddenly, another pair of arms are surrounding her and the scent of perfume engulfs her; it's almost nostalgic.

"I'm sorry," Junko apologizes as she holds Homura against her chest.

It's a familiar feeling and it reminds Homura of things long buried in the past.

The tears threaten to spill but she chokes—everything—down. She won't cry—not for them. Not now, not anymore.

The only thing that Homura will cry for is Madoka, and Madoka is still alive. Still living and still breathing.

As long as she's still here, Homura knows she can handle anything.

Or so she wants to believe.

\\

When something continues to hang in the air throughout dinner, Homura apologizes to Madoka after following her to the laundry room to retrieve her clothes.

"I'm sorry, Madoka, it's my fault that dinner was ruined," she bows in apology.

Madoka looks to her in surprise. "Why are you apologizing, Homura-chan? You didn't do anything wrong! And dinner wasn't ruined!" She grabs her and forces her to straighten up.

"Still, this would have never happened if I hadn't provoked your mother. I should've merely given the abridged version instead of... what I did."

Madoka's face falls. "You mean you would have continued hiding everything," she says softly. Homura can hear something in her voice, but is unable to pinpoint what is it.

She brushes it aside. "Yes," she agrees. She reaches out to pull the dryer door open.

As she slightly kneels to grab her now dried clothes, arms wrap around her waist.

"Homura-chan...that's too sad..." Madoka's voice is muffled as she presses her face against Homura's neck; it sounds like Madoka is about to cry again. "Something like that...is too sad."

Homura stiffens and looks around in panic. She has now upset Madoka and she has no idea what to do.

"I-I'm sorry, Madoka—please don't cry. Not for someone like me."

She's surprised when Madoka grabs her roughly and spins her around.

"Don't talk like that!" Madoka yells at her.

"M-Madoka?"

Madoka can see there's real confusion in Homura's eyes; is this how Homura felt when Madoka called herself stupid?

"Of course I would cry for you, Homura-chan!" Madoka says as she rushes forward, tackling her. Homura trips slightly before she finds herself pushed against the washer.

"M-Madoka?!"

The sound of her crying is the only reply and Homura once again helplessly looks around. She spots Junko, watching her from down the hallway and the woman holds her arms out, miming out what she should do. Homura merely stares as Junko repeats the gestures more vehemently. It's one thing to hug Madoka while they're alone; it's another to hug her while her mother is watching. Junko has one hand on her hip now. Homura can see the threat hidden in her body language, as if daring her to leave her baby girl hanging. Homura raises her arms slowly and awkwardly pats Madoka on the back. Junko nods in approval and disappears into the living room.

\\

"I'm sorry," Madoka laughs softly as she wipes the tears from her face with her palms. "I can't seem to stop crying today," she says softly as she sniffles, obviously embarrassed.

"It's okay. It's understandable, after everything that has happened," Homura nods.

Madoka looks at Homura who through it all, has remained stone-faced. The closest she has ever seen tears from the stoic girl was when Sayaka had pulled on her tail.

"I feel like I've cried enough for the both of us today, ehehe. Too bad I can't be strong like you, Homura-chan."

Homura is retrieving her clothes from the dryer and pauses as she examines her jacket.

"I'm not strong, Madoka," Homura tells her quietly. "And you're stronger than you think," she adds in, with that knowing tone of hers.

Homura turns her skirt over, checking for stains. Once that is done, she peers into the dryer and quickly grabs something, hiding it under the skirt while looking slightly embarrassed.

Madoka giggles when she realizes what it was. There's just something so funny about it that she's laughing and somehow she can't get herself to stop.

"H-Homura-chan!" Madoka clutches her stomach as the laughter continues.

Junko pokes her head into the laundry room and raises an eyebrow at Homura who shakes her head in confusion.

"She should calm down after a while, though it'll help if you get her to drink some water," is all Junko tells her before she is gone, leaving Homura to stare helplessly at Madoka who laughs even harder.

/

After Madoka finally calms down, she goes to wash her face and finds another pink hoodie for Homura to wear.

She then drags Homura over to the living room and has the girl help her with their homework.

"Ahh, I understand it when you help me, but every time I try to do it by myself I always get it wrong! I don't understand mathhhhhhh!" Madoka whines as she pulls at her hair.

"You were close, Madoka," Homura tries to placate her. "Up until here," she points to the equation where Madoka carried over the wrong number.

"Ah! What!" Madoka looks at it more closely and she finds it's true; if she had double checked her work she would've had the correct answer.

Homura nods. "Start over, so you can figure out where you went wrong and I'll check it when you finish," she tells her before she turns to her worksheet.

"Alright! I can do this!" Madoka looks determined as she grabs her eraser, brandishing it like a weapon before she attacks her incorrect solution.

"How are things going?" Junko asks with a smile; she could hear Madoka whining from Tatsuya's room.

"Fine, right, Homura-chan," Madoka answers as she brushes the eraser shavings away. "I'm actually starting to understand it, Mama!" she turns to grin at her mom before turning to Homura. "And it's because Homura-chan is such a great tutor! She gives really easy to understand explanations! I bet she could even tutor Sayaka-chan!"

"Ahh, that would be something amazing, Madoka," Junko responds. They both look at Homura who's focused on writing her homework neatly and is ignoring the both of them.

Junko shakes her head. She was an idiot to think that Homura was a selfish brat; the girl is a good kid.

Maybe too good.

"Aah, you should take your bath soon, Madoka," Junko reminds her daughter. Madoka is now concentrated on the problem in front of her and has her tongue sticking out to the side as she works through the equation.

"Oh," Homura glances up to the clock on the wall and notes the time. "I should be getting home," she says as she regards Junko briefly. As she starts putting her supplies away, she turns to Madoka. "Once you finish that problem, I'll look it over for you, Madoka, but I think you'll be able to finish the rest on your own."

"Eh?" Madoka looks up as she sees Homura packing. "O-Oh, it's already this late?" Junko doesn't miss the look of disappointment on Madoka's face. "Uhm, Mama, will you be able to give Homura a ride home?" There's an unasked question there that Junko hears immediately.

"That won't be necessary," Homura immediately rejects the offer. "I don't live that far, there's no need to trouble Junko-san anymore."

Junko grins and then she's there, slipping her arm around Homura's shoulder. She takes note that Homura jumps at the contact and files the thought away for later. "Of course it won't be any trouble! But, well, I have a better idea: why don't you just stay over tonight, Homura?"

"Eh?" Madoka is surprised briefly but nonetheless grins. "Really, Mama? Even though it's a school night?"

"Well, normally I wouldn't allow it since you and Sayaka-chan tend to stay up watching those scary movies I tell you not to watch," here, Madoka looks sheepish,"but Homura seems to be responsible enough and doesn't seem like one who likes scary movies. Isn't that right, Homura?"

"Uhm. I-it's fine, I can walk home," Homura tries to somehow shrug off Junko's arm without being rude but finds the woman has a strong grip; it must be where Madoka gets it from.

"Madoka, why don't you go take your bath now?" Junko asks.

Madoka looks between Homura and her mom for a moment.

"...Okay," she agrees and slowly gets up. She gives her mom a look that Homura doesn't understand and then, it's just Homura and Junko in the living room.

"U-uhm," Homura gives Junko a nervous side glance. "...I should really be getting home."

Junko nods but doesn't let go. "Listen, Homura, I want to apologize for earlier. I'm sorry. It was wrong for me to assume that... well, to assume I knew anything about your parents and your home life."

"Ah." Homura finally understands what Junko is doing: she feels guilty for putting Homura on the spot earlier but ultimately, it had been Homura's own provocation that had made things escalate that badly. "There's nothing you need to apologize for, Junko-san. It was my own selfishness that drove you to that point and I apologize for my earlier behavior."

"I wasn't lying when I want you to stay over, Homura," Junko says instead. "After dropping that kind of bombshell on my daughter, do you think I'll let you leave that easily?"

Kaname Junko has always been an enigma to Homura, no matter how many times she meets her or talks with her. Homura figures it's because she hasn't had any real adult supervision in a very long time. She just doesn't really understand how someone like Junko, like an adult, thinks.

"I'm...sorry?" Homura is confused and Junko laughs as she holds Homura closer.

"Now, you think that I want you to stay over because I feel guilty for yelling at you earlier, right?" Homura nods in agreement. "Well, that part is true. But I also want you to stay over so that Madoka will know that you're okay."

"I...don't understand," Homura admits.

Junko smiles. "Of course you wouldn't! But, I know my daughter very well, and she won't be able to rest easy knowing that you, are out there, all by yourself while she has this," Junko gestures around her, "within an arm's reach."

Homura's eyebrows furrow slightly. "I'm used to it though."

"That's why, Homura," Junko tells her softly. Homura turns to look at her and Junko winks at her. "Please, humor an old woman's ramblings."

"...You're not old, though?"

/

"Ahh, I feel tired already," Madoka says as she falls over to land on her bed. Her soft, soft bed.

Homura watches as Madoka turns over to bury her face in her pink blankets.

"Considering the events that occurred today, I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't," Homura tells her and Madoka hums in response.

Though Madoka can feel the comfort of her bed lulling her to sleep, she manages to pry open her eyes and rolls over to see what Homura is doing. The other girl is standing in

the middle of the room, fidgeting with the pocket of her hoodie. She looks so awkward that Madoka can't help but smile at her.

"I'm glad you decided to stay, Homura-chan," the sleepiness is evident in Madoka's voice and Homura looks over to her, giving a brief nod.

More like she didn't really have a choice, but she doesn't tell Madoka that, merely making an uncommitted noise of agreement.

Madoka's eyes are closing again and Homura looks at the clock to the side of her dresser: it's 11:17pm, a bit earlier than Homura is used to sleeping. Madoka doesn't seem like she can stay awake any longer, however.

"Perhaps we should go to sleep," Homura says and Madoka hums again in agreement, too content to move.

The smaller girl is sprawled across her bed and though the sleeping arrangements were decided that Homura would merely share a bed with Madoka, Homura doesn't want to bother her and moves to leave the room.

In her haze, Madoka hears the footsteps as Homura walks away and hears the click as the lights are shut off. Madoka waits for Homura to join her, but is confused when the door opens and closes and she forces her eyes open.

"Homura-chan!?"

Madoka is fully awake now, angered that the other girl ditched her and she shoots off from her bed to rush out the door.

A minute later, a confused Homura is being dragged back into the pink room. Madoka closes the door behind them, waiting for her eyes to adjust, before pulling Homura to her bed and moving the blankets away.

"Do you want to sleep by the wall or outside?" Madoka asks. The room is dark, but not at all to Homura and she can see Madoka looking at her expectantly. "Homura-chan?"

"...outside is fine."

"Good, I like sleeping by the wall anyways," Madoka climbs into her bed, scooting over to make room for the other girl who just stares after her. "Homura-chan?" Madoka pats the empty space and Homura hesitates a little too long. "Ho-mu-ra-chan?" the way Madoka says her name sends chills down Homura's spine and she quickly takes her place on the bed besides Madoka. "Good, now lie down." This time, Homura obediently follows as told and is as stiff as a board as Madoka pulls the blankets around them and tucks her in.

"It's warm, huh, Homura-chan?" Madoka says as she tries to snuggle deeper into the mattress.

"...yes," Homura agrees after a moment as she stares at an unfamiliar, yet familiar ceiling.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan."

"...goodnight, Madoka."

/

Homura manages to sleep for two hours, before the nightmares that haunt her nightly forces her eyes open. There's bile building at the back of her throat and she chokes down a terrified sob, trying to move as quietly and quickly as she can for the bathroom down the hall without disturbing the sleeping residents in the house.

Closing the door behind her, Homura doesn't bother turning on the light and barely manages to make it to the toilet before she's pulling back her hair with one hand, lifting the lid with another and throwing up whatever was still left undigested from dinner. She retches and tries to rid herself of the memories and the pain, and she doesn't know how long has passed since she's been kneeling there. Just that her stomach is empty, her throat is burning and her hands are still shaking as she's gripping onto porcelain for dear life.

She doesn't remember (she lies, she always remembers) her dreams and she stays there, forcing the memories away until her legs are numb and her hands finally, finally stop shaking.

With a bit of effort, she clamors heavily to her feet and lowers back down the seat and lid before flushing.

"Homura-chan?"

The familiar, quiet voice catches her completely off guard. She whirls around just as the light turns on and she squints at the sudden brightness. She blinks slowly as her eyes adjust and then she's staring at Madoka who's also blinking and then staring back at her. Madoka's face twists with worry as she can now see how unhinged Homura looks.

Homura lowers her head, feeling entirely too vulnerable and tries to lock her emotionless mask back into place. She fails miserably and the cat ears that always appear whenever she loses control of her emotions lay flat against the top of head.

She avoids looking at Madoka and instead pads over to the sink and turns on the faucet. She washes her hands and arms with soap and water, though she knows that they'll always be dirty (*withtheirblood*). Madoka is silent as Homura splashes her face with water and then rinses out her mouth.

And then the water is off, and she's left standing there, face dripping wet and eyes looking so haunted that Madoka finally shakes from her stupor and is crossing the distance between them. She walks past her and grabs one of the extra face towels off the rack nearby and approaches Homura cautiously.

Homura flinches when she feels the fabric on her cheek. She closes her eyes because she doesn't want to see the look on Madoka's face.

Taking this as a sign of permission, Madoka gently wipes Homura's face and hands dry. When she's done, she sets the towel aside on the sink and gathers the broken girl in her arms and holds her close.

"It's okay, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers softly to her. "It's okay to cry."

Thin, bony hands press into Madoka's back as Homura buries her face into the smaller girl's neck. She's shaking, but knows that she can't let all her emotions go or else she's going to fall into despair.

Taking comfort at the warmth from Madoka's embrace, Homura slowly sets back up her mental barriers. Within a few minutes, she's back to her 'normal' self. She knows that she'll need to clean her soul gem soon; maybe in the morning when she can get away from Madoka for a few minutes.

"Thank you, Madoka," Homura says as she pulls away and puts away her ears and tail.

Madoka is less than surprised to see Homura's usual blank face. Except she now knows what's really hiding beneath.

Madoka feels her heart aching. She wonders how long Homura has been dealing with this pain, but Homura is now leaving and all Madoka can do is follow after her. The smaller girl swipes her hand under her eyes, brushing away the tears that are starting to form.

No, she won't cry—she can't.

She's already cried enough for today.

She flicks off the light as she exits the bathroom and trails after Homura who leads the way back to Madoka's room. Closing the door, Madoka turns to see Homura standing off to the side of the bed, waiting for her to climb in first. She complies and settles into her spot. When Homura climbs in after her, Madoka reaches over and tugs her closer—closer so that their bodies are pressed together and her arms are around Homura, letting the other girl feel that Madoka is here. Here for her and that she's not alone and that things will somehow be okay.

She'd make sure of that.

It takes a while, but eventually Homura relaxes. Madoka waits until she can hear and feel her even breathing, signaling that she's falling asleep, before she too, closes her eyes.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan," she murmurs softly.

A content sigh is her only reply as they both drift off to slee**p.**

AN: Ah, I obviously made up Homura's background since we really know nothing about her and her parents. Neglective parents or being an orphan? I chose the former. Maybe in another story I will choose the latter.

And if you're wondering why she didn't dodge the cup of cocoa, well if it didn't happen the rest of the chapter wouldn't have continued; also, she was too busy drinking her own cocoa to notice. Speed means nothing when you aren't paying attention.

Questions? complaints? comments?

Chapter 6: beliefs

The incessant ringing of her alarm has Madoka eventually relenting her hold on sleep. She slowly opens her eyes, consciousness flooding in like the sunlight streaming in from the window in her room.

Morning.

beepbeepbeepbeepbeep

With a groan, she sits up to turn off the sound, but something around her waist keeps her in place. She looks down to see a pair of familiar black cat ears twitching. She vaguely wonders when they had gained a pet...and then she remembers last night and remembers that the owner of these said ears is mostly reacting to the loud noise.

Madoka maneuvers over to her clock even with Homura still holding her and finally managing to hit the off button after the third attempt.

She sighs in relief when the room is awash in silence. She wriggles away from Homura's grasp before raising her arms high as she stretches.

The black head of hair, cat ears and all, burrows further beneath the blankets and Madoka lets a smile grace her lips; it seems like Homura is like her Mama and has troubles getting up in the morning as well.

Giggling quietly to herself, Madoka moves off the bed, careful not to disturb Homura, and steps onto the plush carpet of her room. She'll let her sleep a bit more and wake her after she gets her mother up.

As soon as the door closes, Homura emerges from under the sheets. She shakes her head slightly before she runs her fingers through her hair to fix the mess of tangles. A few more run throughs and when she's satisfied, she flicks her hair behind her and moves off the bed.

She heads towards her schoolbag, intent on retrieving that extra grief seed she stores inside a tin container. Once found, she summons her own soul gem and isn't surprised by the murky darkness that swirls around. It's not the worst she has seen of her soul gem—but it's obviously not the best. She gently places the grief seed next to it, watching as it absorbs whatever despair she had accumulated just from last night. Her soul gem slowly returns to normal, sparkling and shiny, while the grief seed is darkened and pulsing with curses and broken dreams.

She notes that it's not completely full though, and has at least one more light use to it.

Shaking her head, Homura returns her soul gem to its ring form and places the grief seed back into its special container. She slips that back into her school bag.

Now done with her task, she retracts her cat ears and tail and glances over to the clock; she still has ten minutes or more until Madoka will return and decides to go back to sleep.

/

As she brushes her teeth in the bathroom, Homura feels like she's intruding on something. Madoka and Junko are next to her, and as she stares at their reflections in the mirror, she imagines someone else-someone that shares the same lavender eyes as her-and quickly clamps that thought down. She averts her eyes, instead concentrating on looking everywhere that isn't in front.

She finds that the bathroom is so much more brighter during the day. It's not the first time Homura wonders why there needs to be so much empty space inside. Regardless, it fits the modern decor of the house. She does also like how the walls are covered with numerous amount of projection screens, reminding her of her own living room. They're filled with various programs, from reflections outside the windows to stock market numbers and current events.

As her eyes move around, Homura catches sight of a screen that seems a bit different. It takes her a moment and she realizes she's watching an animated cartoon, most likely one set for Madoka's little brother.

Even during her stay at the hospital, she never really did watch much TV. It was hard to follow set schedules when her fatigue always hit her at the most random times. She instead preferred the stories hidden in written words, places she could delve into whenever, and leave, whenever. Those were her favourite.

Nonetheless, she watches the screen as a cartoon wolf chases around a mischievous rabbit. The wolf is hungry and wants to eat him, but the rabbit is too clever and continues to trick him into falling into his traps. She doesn't notice she has stopped brushing as she continues to watch.

She finds herself hoping that the wolf eats the rabbit; he reminds her of Kyuubey.

Madoka has been chatting with her mother about various happenings at school and notices when Junko suddenly smiles in amusement. Junko nods at something off to the side. Madoka turns and sees that one of Takkun's favourite cartoons has caught Homura's attention.

Surprising—but Madoka is learning everyday that Homura is full of surprises—both good and bad.

For Junko, it's the first time she's reminded that Homura is the same age as her daughter; almost fourteen and she already seems like an adult. She shakes her head and turns her attention back to the sink.

"Ah! Homura-chan! The toothpaste!"

"ack-!"

Junko smiles to herself; kids like Homura needed to just be that—a kid. If everything goes according to plan, then that's exactly what Homura will be.

\\

It's been a while since Homura has sat down and eaten breakfast—and an even longer while since Homura has sat down and eaten breakfast with other people. The food is good and the company is great and—

She stops eating slowly as she suddenly realizes her situation. If this timeline ends up being *not the one*, it's going to be the last one regardless. If this is a sign of things to come, there's no way she's going to be able to handle falling from heights this high, not again. She knows she should cut her losses now, before she's in too far and in too deep.

She needs to walk away before—

"Kitty!"

Homura's thoughts are interrupted as a small tomato sudden shoots towards her. She catches it easily with her quick reflexes.

"Safe!" Madoka says with a grin. Homura merely reaches over and places the tomato back onto Takkun's plate.

"Tomatoes are for eating, Takkun," Homura tells him and sits back down.

Takkun laughs and smiles at her and Homura's reminded how similar it sounds to Madoka's own.

They're good people—Madoka and Tomohisa and Junko and Takkun—if anyone deserves to have a happy life, it was them. So why—

Homura feels a hand cover her own and looks up to Madoka who merely gives her a kind smile. She suddenly realizes the death grip she has on the fork in her right hand and relaxes her hand. Any harder and it would've twisted and bent.

Justlikeeverythingelseshetouches.

"A-ah, sorry," Homura apologizes, ducking her head and turning back to the food on her plate.

Tomohisa mimics Madoka's smile and glances at the clock. "Ah, Mama should be getting to the office soon," he says as Madoka checks the time.

"Eh? But it's still early," Madoka responds in confusion.

Junko finishes the rest of her coffee with one last gulp. "Mama needs to get some paperwork done since she's leaving work early today," she explains.

"Oh…uhmmm… are you meeting one of your friends or something?" Madoka knows her mom rarely leaves work early and finds it strange she didn't mention it at all before today.

"Actually," Junko tells her as she stands, "I want you to come home right after school, young lady."

"Eh!?" Madoka looks at her mom in shock. "D-Did I do something wrong, Mama?" She can't help but look at Homura who seems to be searching for the meaning of life in her plate of eggs.

Junko laughs and shakes her head. "No, no, you're not in trouble, Madoka! I just want to see your cute face more than usual today." She walks over to Tomohisa to give him a kiss before dropping one on Takkun's cheek as well. "And the same goes for you too, Homura."

At the mention of her name, Homura's head snaps up and she stares at her in surprise.

"Both of you, here, straight after school. No detours, no nothing, got it?" Junko tells them sternly. Madoka nods hesitantly while Homura remains frozen. "Make sure she comes, alright, Madoka?" Junko tells her daughter who nods again. "Good."

She holds out her hand and meets Madoka's own halfway; their usual parting given with a high five.

"Homura." Homura blinks as Junko holds out her hand expectantly.

"Like this, Homura-chan!" Madoka shows her and Homura stares blankly before she slowly raises her arm.

Junko sighs and readjusts Homura's hand before bringing her own hand close. The sound is weak but Junko merely winks at Homura.

"We'll work on that more later! Mama needs to leave now or I'll definitely be late!" She tells them as she starts rushing to the door.

"Byebye!" Takkun shouts after her.

"Have a safe trip, Mama!" Madoka calls out. She turns to her dad expectantly.

He gives her a knowing smile. "You'll find out when you come home. Now finish your food before you're late as well. Especially if you want to stop by the store to buy those tights for Homura-chan."

"Aww Papa!" He's unrelenting and Madoka shares a look with Homura, who seems equally confused. She sighs and turns back to her food.

As Madoka chews her toast thoughtfully, she wonders why her mom wants both her and Homura back here, right after school.

Whatever it is, it has to be important enough for her mother to come home early from work.

\\

/Huh, so you two won't be going hunting tonight?/ Sayaka asks as she stifles a yawn.

/No, I'm really sorry, Mami-san, Sayaka-chan, but my mom wants me and Homura-chan for something and she didn't tell us what it was... but.../

/I understand, Kaname-san. Since you aren't a magical girl yet there's no real obligation for you to go on these hunts anyways/

/...Maybe it'll be better for me to go after all. We didn't really hunt anything...yesterday and it'll be easier to work in teams than alone/

/Uhmmmm...but Homura-chan—/

/Eh, I wouldn't do that if I were you, transfer student. Mama Junko is reeeeally scary when she wants to be. Just go—I'll be there to protect Mami-san anyways!/

/.../

/Hey, are you trying to say something, transfer student?/

/Ahem, I believe Miki-san has the right idea however, Akemi-san. Considering how close you are to Kaname-san, I would be against the idea of being on her mother's bad side. Don't worry about me, I have handled this job safely by myself before I met you girls, after all./

/Hey! Don't forget I'll be there too, Mami-san!/

/...Yes, of course. And Miki-san will be accompanying me as well, just in case anything goes wrong./

/I'm really sorry about this!/

/...Just remember to be careful/

/Of course. Thank you./

\\

"...You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," Homura agrees as she turns around to acknowledge Sayaka. "Did anyone see you?"

They're on the roof now, empty since classes have ended for the day.

Sayaka lets out a sigh and forces herself to not rub her forehead in frustration; really, something about Homura really bugs her though she can never figure out why.

"No, no one saw me."

"Are you sure?"

Sayaka grits her teeth in annoyance. "Yes. So if that's all you're going to ask me, I have places I need to be."

"Wait," Homura stops the girl who's one step closer to turning around and walking away. "I just needed to make sure. It's important that what I tell you is only heard by you, and you alone."

Sayaka debates a moment, deciding that she's curious enough to stick around. She adopts a more relaxed pose. "Alright, so talk already. Don't you have somewhere to go as well?"

Homura nods. Madoka is waiting for her. "Yes, and the faster we get this over with, the faster we can both leave."

"Sooo...?" Sayaka gestures impatiently, wanting the other girl to get it over with already.

A pause.

"Miki Sayaka, do you believe that your life is precious? That you care about your family? Your friends?"

The question catches her off-guard. She narrows her eyes at Homura's accusing voice. "What?" she spits out. "Of course I do!"

"Do you, really?" Homura asks her again and this time Sayaka steps closer to her in warning. Not at all worried, Homura presses on. "Because it never really seems like you do."

What the hell?

"What the hell?" Sayaka echoes her thoughts and this time she's right up in Homura's face. "You don't even know me! Acting all high and mighty! What? Just because you think you're Madoka's new best friend now you think you know all about me and that you can say whatever you want?!"

"I do know you, Miki Sayaka," Homura replies. "I know you more than you think."

"Oh yeah?" Sayaka places her hands on her hips and glares down at Homura who remains unaffected. "And what, exactly, do you know?"

"I know, that you're an idiot—" Homura easily ducks the fist swung at her and just as Sayaka tries to grab her, she's no longer there.

"W-what?" Sayaka whirls around and is surprised to see Homura a good distance away, cat ears and tail now visible. "Cheater," Sayaka mutters under her breath.

"I know that soon," Homura continues, hiding her cat ears and tail as though nothing had happened, "maybe today, maybe tomorrow, you will make a wish that will heal the hand of Kamijou Kyousuke; or more specifically you will wish that he will be able to play the violin again."

Sayaka straightens up, defiant. "What? And what's wrong with that?"

"And because you're an idiot, Miki Sayaka, you won't take into account that the rest of Kamijou Kyousuke's body is also going under rehabilitation and will benefit being healed as well."

Here, Sayaka pauses, because she hadn't thought of that. "W-well—"

"But more importantly than that, you are wavering on the real reason for your wish. You say that you are doing everything for him, but in the end, what you really want is to be his hero."

The anger surges through her again and she tightens her hands into fists. "W-What are you—"

"Do not deny it, Miki Sayaka—like I said, I know you," Homura says as she flicks her hair behind her. It only serves to make Sayaka even more angry. "You believe in fairy tales, where the knights always save the princesses. In your case, Kamijou Kyousuke is the helpless princess trapped in the locked tower. You are the knight that will fight the dragon to save him. By your beliefs, when the knight opens that door, the princess should be grateful to see her because no one else was going to save him. Am I incorrect?"

There's a crash of doubt as Sayaka repeats Homura's words over and over. Calling Kyousuke a princess is unsettling, but she finds Homura's analogy is almost spot on.

"N-No," she denies. "I only want Kyousuke to be able to play the violin again—his talents, are being wasted! I can't stand the fact that the world won't be able to hear what he can do! All because of that stupid accident! If only it had been me! I would've traded places with him easily!"

"...The amazing thing about wishes is that they can transcend simple things like space and time," Homura comments. Sayaka gives her an annoyed look. "That is, to say, you can still wish to trade places with Kamijou Kyousuke and he'll have never been in the hospital in the first place."

"What?" Sayaka blinks.

"But then," there's a faraway look in Homura's eyes as she stares into the distance, "there's also certain things you have to consider. Even when you change certain events in a timeline, other things happen in its stead and in the end, *something* will still happen, whether you want it to or not." She turns to Sayaka and her eyes are as cold as her voice. "Do you understand really, what happens when you make a wish?"

"Eh?" The way Homura keeps changing subjects is making Sayaka's head hurt as she struggles to catch up. "S-Sure, the wishes create a miracle, which grants the wisher the power to become a magical girl, right?"

At least that's what Mami and Kyuubey had said.

"In a sense, yes," Homura agrees. "But what is the price?"

"Price?" Sayaka straightens up because she knows this. "We just have to fight witches!"

"But for how long?" Homura asks her. "And why?"

"Until they're all dead! And because they're bad! Y-You're a magical girl! You know this! Why—"

"But—where do witches come from?"

Sayaka stares at her in confusion. "W-what? You were there! When Mami-san and Kyuubey were explaining the origins! Witches come from curses!"

"But—where do these curses come from?"

Here, Sayaka falters. "T-The witches... m-make curses.."

Homura shakes her head, as if unsatisfied by her answer. "But what is the source, Miki Sayaka? How do witches even exist if they need curses to exist before they can actually exist?"

"I-I don't know!" Sayaka says as something prickles in the back of her mind. There's the feeling of falling and she remembers drowning in a sea of darkness. "W-Witches are born from...from..." her voice sounds strained and her legs are unsteady as something—*something* passes through her. "Witches are born from d-despair..." she whispers as she collapses onto her knees, holding onto her head in frustration.

Her reaction surprises Homura. Perhaps, if she pushes her further...

"If you make your wish, and save Kyousuke but he doesn't run into your arms, what will you do?"

"W-what?"

"What if he doesn't like you, but likes someone else?"

"What are you—?"

"And, what if someone else, like a friend of yours, someone you'd think would never betray you, likes Kamijou Kyousuke as well?"

"N-No..."

"'Kyousuke is my friend and can only be mine,' is that what you're thinking?"

"S-shut up—"

"'After everything I've done for him, how can he not appreciate me? I buy him music to remind him of his talent—and visit him everyday to encourage him so of course he likes me best.'"

"S-Stop it!"

"You don't know though, if he likes you—but you assume that he reciprocates your feelings. And you can't think—don't want to think about what you will you do if he doesn't like you. That's why you can't confess to him."

"Shut up! You don't know anything! You're—you're just a stupid transfer student—"

"You assume that when you become a magical girl, all your problems will be solved; that everything will be perfect and amazing because you'll be a hero, saving the day, saving Kyousuke, and all you'll need to do is kill some witches and it'll be a done deal. Don't you wonder what the *real price* of being a magical girl is? Why a thing such as a

soul gem exists, and more importantly what happens to a soul gem when a magical girl falls into despair?"

Sayaka turns to stare at Homura as a memory flashes through her mind.

"Our ...souls..." Sayaka repeats slowly. "and witches.. are born from..." her voice trails off.

"...Yes," Homura agrees.

"Why...are you telling me all this?" Sayaka croaks out.

"...Because I think you'll finally believe me this time."

"...this time?"

"Go home, Miki Sayaka," Homura tells her instead. "Go home. Eat dinner with your parents. Look at your house, your life, and think to how good you have it. Think how it would feel to lose it all—over someone who may, or may not like you back. If you feel that everything you love is worth exchanging for a boy who will not appreciate your sacrifices, then I will not stop you from making your wish. And then ask yourself, do you really care about your family and friends, if you can't even see how your own suffering will affect them as well."

Sayaka stares at the floor, eyes unfocused as she remembers—*things*—and she's only half aware when someone, Homura, helps her to her feet.

"Home," Homura urges her. Sayaka can only nod as she stumbles to the direction of the stairs. "Oh, and Miki Sayaka?" Sayaka stops walking. "I don't think I have to tell you not to mention this to Tomoe Mami or Kyuubey." Sayaka doesn't say anything but Homura knows she's listening. "There's a reason Tomoe Mami doesn't know—and you can now understand that Kyuubey can't be trusted. I'll deal with Madoka myself."

Sayaka turns back and Homura can see a spark of fire—threatening harm if anything comes to Madoka—in those listless eyes. Homura's at least taking that as a good sign and then the other girl is disappearing down the stairs.

The Miki Sayaka of the previous timeline, the timeline that had *almost been the one,* had proven to Homura that people can still change, no matter how stubborn they are.

Homura hopes that in this timeline, this Miki Sayaka can once again defy all odds against her once more.

She sighs angrily, trying to calm down her emotions as she follows after Sayaka.

Madoka is waiting for her.

\\

It doesn't work.

As her steps take her further from school, her agitation continues to grow and saying she's only agitated at this point would have been the understatement of the century.

What should've been a simple warning had suddenly warped into a cascade of words as waves of pent up resentment and regrets washed over her because Sayaka always, always somehow got under her skin.

Even when Homura had been a different kind of Homura(weak), Sayaka had been quick to judge and quick to blame. Always taking anyone's side but hers. To Miki Sayaka, Akemi Homura was the representation of evil and she was the representation of good.

Black and white.

Good and right.

She hadn't meant to say so much, but somehow the words wouldn't, couldn't, stop, and then it was too late to take everything back. Homura just hopes that it won't backfire and hurt her later on; she's still working on this timeline being *the one,* but she's still not sure at this point.

There's a small part of Homura, the small, original part of her that still hasn't died, that still retains feelings of guilt for her continuous treatment of Sayaka (everyone). But what's done is done, and Homura just saves her regret and locks it into another little box in her mind. When everything is finally over and Madoka is safe, Homura will slowly open every single one and face what she has become.

But until then..

Homura takes a deep breath to calm her mind. She dismisses the issues with Sayaka and concentrates on more pressing matters at the moment: the fact that Junko had pretty much stated that Homura needed to follow Madoka home, or else.

Or else what...? And why?

Homura has never had to deal with this before from Junko. Usually it was a simple, 'You should visit more often, Homura!' or a 'Don't be a stranger, Homura-chan!' never a, 'I want to see you here after school, young lady!' Though that had been said more to Madoka than her. Still...

Whatever it is, it seems related to the mess that had happened yesterday, which is already in another box of regret. Homura feels like gathering her face in her hands and weeping until the tears run dry; it feels like she's going to go crazy with how unpredictable this timeline is starting to become.

Her weakened control over her emotions is not helping, all because of these—stupid!—animal traits—and—she breaks off her thoughts. She doesn't want to clean her soul gem again so soon.

Instead, she takes another calming breath, focusing on the little things, like walking to Madoka's house. Everything else is shoved into the back of her mind.

There's not much room left there and broken boxes tumble out as expected. But it's all she can do to get by.

She knows, though, it's just a matter of when, not if, when there's just too much pushed back and they all inevitably fall down.

/

Madoka remains quiet as she follows after Homura who's leading the way to her house.

Something during those 20 minutes when Homura had disappeared had once again upset her. If Madoka takes into consideration the shocked state she had seen of Sayaka earlier, it isn't hard to put two and two together.

She doesn't know what had happened and wonders why they can't get along. Even from the start, Sayaka had been suspicious of Homura but Madoka has always been one to look past initial appearances. She's glad that she has seen beyond what everyone else has seen.

Glancing at Homura, Madoka can tell that the other girl is thrumming with unspent emotion. If her tail was visible, it would most likely be flickering around, nonstop, showing off the irritation that is rolling off her in unseen waves.

Madoka wonders how she can help.

Maybe, she can calm her somehow?

Before she can kick her body into action, Homura takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. There's a part of Madoka that aches when she sees that mask slip back into place within a matter of seconds.

Madoka increases her pacing until she's close enough to Homura and reaches out to grab her hand. Homura blinks at her in surprise, surprise that warps into confusion as Madoka slips their palms close and intertwines their fingers.

"M-Madoka?" the mask that always breaks a little for her has Madoka smiling.

"It'll be okay, Homura-chan," she tells her softly as she gives her hand a squeeze. "Whatever it is, it'll be okay."

Homura doesn't respond, but eventually she squeezes back. They continue to walk hand in hand in comfortable silence.

Halfway there, and they're back to the park that they had stopped by last evening. Instead of empty fields and dark shadows, the area is filled with families and laughing children. Madoka smiles as she watches kids Tatsuya's age running around, carefree.

Homura stops walking as she looks across the park and into the distance. Madoka stops and waits.

"Madoka..."

"Yes, Homura-chan?"

"H-how..." she swallows hard and Madoka patiently lets her organize her thoughts. "How... do you know it'll be okay...?"

"Hmmm," Madoka looks thoughtful, smile still on her lips. She walks forward, tugging Homura with her. "How can things not be okay, Homura-chan?" She gestures to everything around them: the laughing children, the smiling parents, the things that are life, vibrant and alive. "Things may seem scary and bad at times, but as long as we can hope for a better tomorrow, as long as there's still that hope there, then in the end, it'll all work out somehow."

Madoka knows it sounds naive and Homura knows it's naive. Hope? No one knows better than Homura just how long believing in hope can last. She's this close to falling apart at the seams and everyday it feels like she's grasping at straws for that Hope to one day save Madoka.

Hope? Hope indeed.

As if sensing her thoughts, Madoka turns back to look at her. "If you can't believe in hope, Homura-chan, you can believe in me instead."

Homura's eyes widen. Believe...in Madoka? That is something that resonates within her very soul, but every timeline, Madoka was always—

"Ehehe, Homura-chan, actually, can I tell you a secret?" Homura stares at her while Madoka continues smiling. "You know, even though I've only known you for a few days now, it feels like I've met you before."

Homura feels her heart thudding loudly in her chest. Could it really be...?

"Gentle and sweet Homura-chan," Madoka says softly, "who's actually kind of a crybaby, but has been working very hard at burying everything deep in her heart. Someone who's still working hard for something, no matter how much it hurts."

There's the sound of laughter around them but all Homura can see is Madoka in front of her, and her hands are trembling—

"I know it's hard for you, so please, even if you can't believe in hope, I want you to believe in me, Homura-chan. I have enough hope for the both of us and maybe a little more," Madoka tells her with a grin.

She is hoping to ease Homura's fears with her words, but suddenly Homura has her face in her hands. A fearful moment, and Madoka realizes that Homura's shoulders are shaking.

She's crying.

"Eh? H-Homura-chan!" she rushes forward, her so-called moment of coolness ruined by the broken girl in front of her. "W-What's wrong?"

Homura tilts her head up and she's smiling—a real, genuine smile, even as the tears continue to fall from her eyes.

"I want to believe in you, Madoka," Homura whispers softly.

Madoka feels something light within her and gives her a determined smile.

"Thank you, Homura-chan. It'll work out, somehow. I promis**e.**"

AN: I don't even know what I'm writing anymore. Thank you for the reviews though, those few people of you :)! I wouldn't know if people are even interested in this story otherwise. I'm also using less (), but more ; and remembering more words to use. I also hate describing things.

Thanks for reading.

85 Chapter 7: offer

They arrive back at the Kaname house later than planned. As soon as Junko notices Homura's eyes are slightly swollen and red-rimmed, and a nod from Madoka, she's quickly forgiving them; something had obviously happened.

"We're home, Mama!" Madoka tells her. "I'm sorry we're late." She doesn't bother making up a lie.

"It's alright, I'm sure you have your reasons. Welcome home you two," Junko replies. "I know you usually grab something after school, but do you think you can wait an hour or more before we get something to eat?"

"Sure, Mama!" Madoka nods.

They turn to Homura who agrees quietly.

"Alright, good! Now, Madoka, go change your clothes, so that you're wearing something that will show the world you're having fun spending the afternoon with your Mama! Maybe that new dress you bought last week?"

"Uhmmm..." Madoka glances at Homura and her mother makes a shooing gesture in her direction. "Alright, Mama. I'll be right back, Homura-chan." She makes sure to squeeze Homura's hand before she heads off to her room.

Junko turns to Homura who's staring at the floor.

"Now, now, Homura, I'm not going to bite!" Junko laughs. Homura merely tries to make herself seem smaller. "Ahh," Junko scratches her head; for some reason Homura seems even more scared of her today. "Don't worry, you're not in trouble or anything," she tells her gently. "Did you enjoy the lunch Tomohisa made today?"

"Uhm.. yes...it was very good," Homura mumbles softly.

"Good, good. Was it enough? I'm sure he packed as much inside as possible, but if it wasn't enough, I'll have him buy a larger bentou for you to bring next time."

Here, Homura finally glances up and her eyes are confused as she mulls over Junko's words. What does she mean by next time? Junko merely smiles and looks at her expectantly. Homura realizes she's waiting for her reply.

"Uhmmm..n-no, I mean," she fumbles over her words and fidgets with the sleeve of her jacket nervously. Shaking her head, she grasps at her frayed emotions and tries to piece together a semblance of calm. A few minutes pass before she manages to somewhat succeed.

Junko quietly watches, letting the girl pick herself back together.

"It was... more than enough, thank you," Homura finally replies.

Junko ignores how her own heart tugs painfully for the girl.

"That's good. If you have any preferences or favourites just tell him! Tomohisa can make anything—he's like a personal chef!" Junko looks proud.

Calmer now, Homura stares at her blankly and goes over Junko's choice of words in her mind. Perhaps, she is going to have Tomohisa prepare her lunch from now on? That—

has happened before and Homura is suddenly relieved; lunch from Tomohisa isn't a bad thing at all.

"All done, Mama!" They both turn to see Madoka as she emerges from the hallway. She's blushing as she fiddles with her dress nervously. "H-how is it?"

Her school uniform has been replaced with a simple, one piece white dress that has a small pink bow in the front. There's another white ribbon in the middle that pulls and ruffles the fabric tighter around her waist, leaving the rest of the skirt to flare out and end a bit above her knees. She also has on a pink cardigan on top, and a silver bracelet on her left wrist.

Though surprised at how quickly Madoka had changed, Junko easily switches gears. She takes a moment to take in her daughter's appearance. There's a grin on her face and she nods in approval.

"Ooh! Look at my cute daughter! All those secret fans of yours will fall over trying to look at you!" Junko tells her.

Madoka pouts at her mom. "I don't have any secret fans, Mama!" She turns to Homura, feeling shy again. "Uhm...h-how do I look, Homura-chan?"

Homura feels the walls close in as she's put on the spot by a seemingly simple question. "U-Uhm..." she stammers and she can't help it as her cheeks redden. "Y-You look..fine, Madoka."

"O-oh?" Madoka sounds disappointed. Homura looks to Junko for help.

'Ahh' the older woman sighs at Homura's horrible choice of words; she really needs to work on her social skills.

"I'm sure she means that you look cute! Right, Homura?"

Homura nods in agreement, "Y-yes, Madoka, white suits you."

"Ehehe, I bet you're wondering why I'm not wearing a pink dress, huh?" Madoka teases Homura as she feels better about her clothes.

Here, Homura shakes her head. She's glad Madoka isn't wearing pink; pink would remind her of *that* outfit.

"No, I think it's good you're wearing white. It makes your eyes and hair stand out more."

She reaches over and fixes one of the ribbons in Madoka's hair that had become slightly loose, no doubt due to her haste in changing clothes.

Junko places a hand to her mouth to hide her smirk.

"A-ah, t-thanks, H-Homura-chan," Madoka feels her face blush up to the tip of her ears.

Junko decides to save her daughter and replaces her grin with a smile, and claps her hands. "Alright! Now that Madoka is ready, it's time for us to continue onto the next part of our plans!"

Madoka is immediately relieved when Homura turns those deep lavender eyes to Junko. She does the same.

"What's the next part of our plans, Mama?"

Junko smiles and gestures to Homura. "We're going to drop by Homura's place."

Any relief Homura felt earlier disappears as her stomach drops.

"W-What?"

/

Homura's silent in the car, staring out the window as she tries to remember if she has remembered to hide the things that she needed to hide in her apartment.

Madoka can sense Homura's trepidation, but Junko was and is still adamant about paying a visit. All Homura could do was program the address into the GPS and then they were on their way.

Once they reach one of the older districts where the houses are less modern and more old fashioned, Junko turns into the underground parking structure slated for the European styled apartments for where Homura lives. It's empty considering the time and she parks the car at a fairly close spot.

As soon as the engine is off, Homura turns to Junko.

"U-Uhm, would it be alright—if, uhm," Homura looks slightly panicked.

Junko looks at her and then suddenly there's a gleam in her eye and a smirk on her face.

"Ahh. I see," she says knowingly. Madoka regards her mother curiously. "Mm, well it's perfectly natural for someone your age to have...things you want to hide. Don't be embarrassed; girls can like those things too."

"Hm?" Madoka seems confused but the implications slowly dawn on her and this time her face is blown out red. "M-Mama!"

Homura is no better off, but she can't worry about that. She needs to go hide those containers of gunpowder that she had been too lazy to put away the other day.

"You have ten minutes," Junko calls out to her teasingly.

Homura tears open the door and runs out before her head can explode from embarrassment.

Junko merely laughs; she loves teasing kids that are going through puberty.

/

As soon as Homura is inside, she transforms into her magical outfit. She starts packing all her random bomb making supplies in her shield, as well as whatever else she had lying around that would scream 'international terrorist' if Junko saw them. She has been a bit lax with her organization lately, not that anyone can blame her, but she resolves to at least fix those bad habits of leaving spare guns lying around.

She also grabs her projection machine, stuffing it inside, just in case. When that is done, she scours her apartment, making sure to double check that she has nothing else suspicious lying around.

Once satisfied that nothing is out of place, she dissolves her magical costume, cat ears and all, and is back to wearing her school uniform.

Nodding to herself, she decides to check once more in case she forgot something important.

/

"Well, think she's ready?" Junko asks as she looks at the watch on her wrist.

"M-Mama, do you really think..." Madoka is too embarrassed to finish the question.

Junko grins before she slips her arms around her daughter's shoulder. "Maybe you can ask her to show you later, Madoka."

"M-Mama!"

"Let's go see what Homura's apartment looks like," Junko merely says as she drags her blushing daughter towards the door with the nameplate that reads 'Akemi Homura.'

\\

"Hmmmmmm, what do you think, Mama?"

"Hmmmmmm, what do you think, Madoka?"

Mother and daughter are exploring Homura's apartment, taking in the plain decor, the very sparsely furnished living room, and the general feeling that this place felt like somewhere someone slept in and that was it.

In fact, the only thing that tells Madoka that Homura actually lives here, besides the nameplate, is the refrigerator that only has a container of milk inside, and a cupboard full of cat food, both canned and dry.

As Madoka stares at the metal canisters, she has an awful thought. She shakes her head because Homura wouldn't do that, would she...? And then, as Madoka thinks more on it, she tries to not let out an exasperated sigh, because, no, it actually sounds like something Homura would do.

"It's pretty empty, Mama."

"Indeed, Madoka, it's pretty empty."

Homura tries to look unaffected as the two Kanames examine every nook and cranny, even opening the cabinets and the refrigerator; she's not sure what they're looking for, but every second longer they're inside, the more they seem displeased.

Maybe she should've kept the large pendulum projection up...? And she hadn't had a chance to add in the extra chairs yet...

"Well, I guess it's to be expected," Junko states after giving it some thought. "You only started living here not that long ago, so you're still in the process of settling in, right Homura?"

"Y-Yes.." Homura agrees.

Madoka isn't at all convinced.

"Is this your room, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks instead, and points to one of the two doors down a separate hallway.

Homura nods hesitantly.

"Alright!" Junko has that shine in her eyes as they approach the room. "I can understand the living room, Homura, but a girl's room is her life! What's inside says everything about her! Don't disappoint me! Tell me who you are, Akemi Homura!"

With a flourish, she throws open the door and they peer inside.

In a way, Madoka and Junko aren't exactly disappointed at the plain room. There's a lone bed with purple sheets, a small dresser and a small table inside.

"Ah..." Madoka scratches her head while Junko sighs in frustration.

"Wait! No, I won't be defeated!" Junko perks up as she notices the sliding door on one of the walls. "Even if her room is plain, a girl's clothes can still reveal it all! Let's go, Homuraaaaaaaa!" Just like before, she grabs the handle and enthusiastically slides the door open.

Madoka isn't at all surprised to see the closet mostly empty, except for a dark green duffel bag, a cardboard box and an extra school uniform.

"Argh! No!" Junko turns towards the dresser. "I will not concede!"

Homura blushes as Junko opens all three drawers, finding only two sets of pajamas, a few packages of black tights, and spare underwear.

"Homura," Junko turns and places her hands on the girl's shoulders who jumps at the sudden contact. "Please tell me you were going to eventually buy some clothes...?"

Homura fidgets under Junko's gaze. This time the woman can't hold back and screams in frustration.

"Madoka!" she snaps her fingers to her daughter who straightens up and salutes her.

"Your orders, sir?"

"Get that duffel bag in the closet!"

"Yes, sir, right away, sir!" She grabs the duffel, which she curiously notes there's a tag that reads property of JSDF on it, and holds it up to her mom. "Supplies retrieved, sir!"

"Alright, now take that uniform and then everything in that dresser and put it inside, stat!"

Here Madoka falters because—but she takes a deep breath and nods. "Y-Yes sir!" She quickly packs away everything inside and turns back to her mother. "All done, sir!"

"At ease, soldier!" Junko says, thoroughly amused at both Homura's and Madoka's blushing faces. She turns back to Homura. "Alright, is there anything in this room that you would like to bring back with you?"

"Uhm..." Homura is stalling because it's slowly dawning on her exactly what Junko is doing. This has definitely never happened in any of her previous timelines. The thought makes her mouth dry and her hands sweaty; this isn't what's supposed to happen at all!

Sensing her hesitation, Junko does what she knows best.

"Homura!" The tone in Junko's voice is clear and Homura unconsciously stands to attention. "If you're done here, we can move onto the living room."

Homura nervously averts her eyes. She walks towards the only table in the room and opens the small drawer. They watch as she reaches inside and pulls out a set of dark purple ribbons, and a pair of red framed glasses.

Just the sight of that almost familiar red has Madoka's eyes widening. She can't help but get that feeling once again as a small memory of a timid and shy Homura crosses her mind; it disappears just as sudden, leaving Madoka with a sense of loss that she can't even begin to describe.

"Do you have a case for those?" Junko asks as she gestures to the glasses.

Homura shakes her head. "Uhm.. no, I lost them a while ago."

A long time ago.

"I have a case for my sunglasses in the car; I'll let you use that once we get back there," Junko nods. "Alright, is that it?"

Homura stares down at her glasses that reminds her of *everything.* She regains her bearings as she realizes she can't let Junko do this—Homura can't afford to be distracted, not now, not when she's supposed to be making sure that this timeline is *the one*.

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly before facing Junko with steel eyes. "Junko-san, I really appreciate what you're trying to do but I'm-u-uhm..t-that—" her resolve slowly crumbles as the wrath of full mama bird Junko stares down at her; Madoka's sure that if Homura had her cat ears out, they'd be completely flat against her head as a sign of submission.

"I guess we're done here," Junko states and Homura nods, keeping her eyes peeled to the floor. "Alright, time for the living room then. Let's go."

Homura and Madoka obediently follow after her.

\\

As Homura exits the apartment building, she can't help but glance up. The rows of familiar windows, ones that have always been another one of those constants throughout all her timelines greets her, and she feels conflicted. On one hand, she knows she should be firm with Junko and refuse the offer. On the other hand, it's really hard to say no to Junko. Another part, that small, original part of Akemi Homura that's still alive, thinks that a change of scenery is a good thing; some place brighter and warmer might drive away those ghosts, literally and figuratively, that always haunts her at night...

"Homura-chan?" Madoka calls over to her.

She takes one last glance above her before she's moving to catch up with Junko and Madoka, who are lugging the few things from her apartment back to the car.

A sound stops Homura in her tracks. A sudden weight on her shoulder as a grey cat headbutts Homura in the cheek.

"A-Amy."

"Meow."

"Well, I was held up—no, I wasn't deliberately—"

"Meow."

"No, something just—"

"Meow."

"Like I said, I had no time—Ow! Amy! You're being ridi—stop it!"

Junko doubles back to grab Homura who isn't following them like she's supposed to. She stops when she's greeted with the sight of Homura trying to pull a little cat away from her.

"Ow ow ow! Stop it! I'm sorry!"

"Ah, is that the cat all the cat food is for?" Junko's voice is amused.

Homura blushes at being caught unaware and Amy finally lets go of Homura's ear.

"Meow."

"Oh she's a little cutie isn't she?" Junko smiles as she steps closer to scratch Amy on the chin. "Kinda like her owner, hm?"

"Meow."

Homura rubs at her ear and mutters something under her breath.

Junko can't help but laugh when she sees Amy turn her tail towards Homura and then jump onto Junko's shoulder, almost as if she been offended by Homura's comment.

"Alright, now is that everything, Homura?"

Homura nods in agreement. She follows Junko as she leads them to where Madoka is waiting.

\\

After a quick detour where they drop off Homura's belongings and place the milk into the refrigerator, they head out again. Amy is brought along, just in case Tomohisa and Tatsuya arrive home first.

Junko drives them to a nearby sushi bar after seeing Homura perk up at the mention of raw fish.

Once they arrive, Junko parks and they emerge from the car. Junko turns to regard Homura about what they should do about Amy.

"She's an outdoor cat," Homura says and frowns slightly when Amy refuses to leave Madoka's arms. "Amy, you can't come in with us."

"Meowww." Amy tries to hide further in Madoka's arms.

"I know, but animals aren't allowed inside."

"Meow...meow."

"...I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

"Meow. Meow."

The normally passive Homura places her hand around Amy's head, gripping it tightly but not enough to harm. She gives Amy a very forced smile.

"...you'll wait outside, won't you, Amy?"

"..meow."

"Good."

Homura pretends like she was merely petting Amy. She rubs the top of her head once more, before removing her hand. Amy licks Madoka on the cheek and jumps out of her arms and onto the sidewalk. She bounds away, up into a nearby tree and lays down on one of the thicker branches for a nap.

"Shall we go?" Homura says as she flicks her hair behind her and walks towards the restaurant.

Madoka turns to her mom and gives her a nervous smile.

"L-Let's go in too, Mama. H-Homura-chan, wait for us!"

Junko hangs back as she sees Madoka run after her. She shrugs. It makes sense that Homura would have some strange quirks; she'd be more worried if she didn't.

Probably.

\\

When they're done and they exit the restaurant, they notice that Amy isn't in the tree anymore. In fact, she's nowhere in sight. Madoka suggests they look for her but Homura merely shakes her head.

"She'll be fine," Homura reassures her. Amy isn't exactly her pet and they aren't always together anyways. School and witch hunting made sure of that.

"Hmmm," Junko and Madoka share a look. "Are you sure you shouldn't go after her, Homura?"

Homura waves off her concern.

The three of them pile back into the car to head for the last stop of the day: Mitakihara Mall.

/

As soon as they step inside, Junko leads the girls expertly towards one of the shops. She knows this place will have clothes that will fit perfectly for someone with the body type and complexion that Homura has.

Junko is now in her element. A woman with a mission. They continue to plow through store to store as she and Madoka have fun choosing things for the quiet girl to wear; a girl who can only obediently humor them, because she'll do anything that Madoka tells her and is unable to directly defy Junko.

In other words: mother and daughter have fun using Homura as their personal dress-up doll.

Homura can only think that the female Kanames are scary as they shove outfit after outfit at her. Only when Homura has several bags full of clothes(all paid for by Junko, though Homura insisted she pay and was promptly shot down), that they finally slow

their pace, and she can catch her breath as they take a break to get some drinks at the food court.

It's been a very long while since she's done something as simple as shopping, and Homura feels that she'd rather fight a witch any day, than follow Junko and Madoka to the mall ever again.

"Alright, we have enough time to drop by a couple more stores before we need to get back home for dinner," Junko tells Homura and Madoka as she starts gathering up their shopping bags off the floor.

"Okay, Mama," Madoka says as she stands as well and pushes her chair back under the table.

Homura takes the last sip of her milkshake before following after them.

"I can throw that away for you, Homura-chan, just put it on the tray."

"Thank you, Madoka."

Madoka discards the empty cups into a nearby waste bin, and takes a few bags from Homura when she rejoins them.

"Is there any place you want to visit, Homura?" Junko asks, once more leading them through the mall, though this time at a more leisurely pace.

Homura thinks for a bit but spots a nearby map kiosk and heads straight for it. She thumbs through the directory quickly, but backtracks when a store name catches her eye.

"Hmmm?" Madoka notices when Homura slows down her browsing, and recognizes the name of the store. "Oh! Pet Heaven? Did you want to get something for Amy?"

"A collar, and some snacks," Homura murmurs.

"Maybe a litter box and kitty litter too," Junko adds in and Homura looks at her. "I noticed you didn't have any in your apartment."

"Amy comes and goes as she pleases."

"Still, it'll still be good to pick some up, just in case," Junko tells her and Homura merely nods in agreement; she's learning that sometimes it's just better to do as told by Junko than to argue with her. "Oh, does Amy have her shots? If not, we need to get those done as soon as possible."

To her relief, Homura nods again. "She has most of the basic shots done, but has an appointment next week for another set."

"Good, good," Junko looks at her in approval. "Alright, let's go girls."

"Okay, Mama."

"Okay."

/

The three split up as soon as they enter the store. Junko and Madoka head towards the back, where they can gush over the numerous pets displayed for sale, while Homura goes on a search for those biscuits and a collar for Amy.

Pet Heaven, like all the other stores at the mall, is a pretty modern and spacious pet store with glass partitions separating the different sections inside. It's nothing like the small local pet shop that Homura usually frequents. When she enters the long aisle designated for cats, she's amazed at the amount of variety of snacks she can purchase; she should've come here a lot sooner.

She notices a section of collars and chooses a dark pink, almost red coloured one that has a little bell attached to it for Amy. Once that's done, she turns excited eyes towards the various boxes and bags filled with treats that cats love.

She painstakingly compares and contrasts the ingredients for every single snack, determining their health factor and taking into account which ones are labeled as recommended. She finally has dropped to three choices when Madoka peers down the aisle and finds her.

She blinks as she notices Homura squatting in the middle of the aisle, shopping bags beside her and three smaller treat bags in front of her, face looking very serious.

Madoka smiles.

"Ho-mura-chan~" Madoka calls out to her when she's close enough.

Homura peers up as she notices Madoka walking towards her. "Madoka."

"Mm, Mama says we should head home after you're done buying what you need here," she tells her and Homura looks surprised.

Had that much time passed?

"Ahh, I'm sorry Madoka, because of me, you weren't able to do any shopping," Homura apologizes as she moves to stand, grabbing the pouches of snacks with her.

"No, no," Madoka waves her hands in front of her. "It's okay; I don't really have anything I need to buy, and I had fun picking out clothes for you. Really."

Homura looks doubtful but she nods. Madoka moves closer to see what Homura is now holding.

"You can buy all three, if you'd like?" Madoka suggests.

Homura shakes her head. "It's too tempting..."

For Amy or for Homura, Madoka wonders.

"Mm, is there one you're especially leaning towards?"

"This one," Homura says as she holds out a blue bag, "oh, but...this one... is labeled as the number one recommended snack..."

Madoka can't help but giggle at how torn Homura looks.

"Alright, since you can't decide, I'll show you what I usually do," Madoka says as she sets her own bags besides Homura's. She takes the potential choices from her, and lines them up on the shelf in front of them. "Okay, now close your eyes, Homura-chan."

"...?"

Madoka winks at her. "Trust me."

"A-Alright, Madoka." She closes her eyes.

"Okay, keep them closed!" Madoka waves her hands in front of Homura's eyes to make sure she's not watching. She then turns to the three bags and starts mixing them up. A few shuffles around and she stops.

"Madoka?"

"Okay, Homura-chan—no! Don't open your eyes!"

"S-Sorry."

Madoka moves them again just in case. "Without opening your eyes, choose either the left, the middle, or the right one."

"M-Madoka—"

"Homura-chan~ which one do you choose?"

"U-uhm... the...the l-left...no! Wait! The middle...?"

"Only one choice! And you gotta decide with your gut feeling, Homura-chan!"

Further down the aisle, Junko, who came to find the girls and search for kitty litter, laughs to herself as she watches the two interact; the two really are cute together.

"O-Okay...then... t-the... left!" Homura says as she opens her eyes.

It's neither of the two choices that she showed Madoka earlier and is the one she had been close to putting down. She isn't happy with her choice but Madoka waggles her finger at her.

"Nope, you can't take it back," Madoka says as she hands Homura the red bag and puts the other two on their correct shelves. "Okay, now let's go find Mama and then we can —Oh! Mama, there you are."

The two of them grab their bags and walk towards Junko.

"Are you two ready to go?" Junko asks with a smile as she chooses a box of generic kitty litter.

"Yup!" Madoka replies as Homura nods.

"Okay, let's pay for these and head home."

"Okay!"

\\

Once outside, the sky is now a transition of dusk to night as the sun is already disappearing behind the horizon. They head to the car, barely managing to stuff all the bags inside the trunk; it takes all three of their efforts to get it closed.

"Whew!" Junko wipes her forehead in jest and heads towards the driver's seat. She stops when she notices that Homura is staring off into the distance.

"U-Uhm," Madoka glances at her mom, but before Junko can suggest anything, Homura merely turns to the car and opens the door. "Homura-chan?"

Homura says nothing as she steps inside.

"Is everything okay?" Junko asks her and she nods as she closes the door.

"B-but—" Madoka knows that something is bothering her.

Junko shakes her head and Madoka sighs in frustration before she enters the car. She tries to ask Homura what's wrong, but the girl remains tight-lipped and Madoka eventually gives up.

It's quiet on the ride back and Junko turns on the radio to fill in the silence instea**d.**

AN: As always thanks for reviews ! :) Uhm. As for Homura's cat traits, definitely purring but the kneading thing not so much (though I can just add that in somehow, doesn't really matter) Funny though, I really know nothing about cats but I do know milk isn't good for them and that they shouldn't eat that much fish but I'm just throwing in stereotypes of typical cat behaviors!? Maybe. But remember, Homura has cat traits but she's not really a cat... so milk doesn't affect her and stuff. I'm just making stuff up as I go along but trying to at least research a bit so things seem plausible. The story is progressing slowly and really, each chapter is longer but I just cut them into smaller pieces. Uh. Yeah, I think that's it.

Thanks again for reading

Chapter 8: red on white

AN: this fic is labeled T for a reason. I don't think this chapter really needs a warning. No complaints about things though since I don't think it's that bad anyways; just thought I'd let you know. Usual notes at the end, like always.

There's a reason why the Kaname Household is so clean—and a reason why any guests that usual sleep over end up on the fold out sofa bed in the living room.

Despite the spacious interior of the house, most of the rooms are occupied. The one room that should've been an extra guest room had been converted into an office for Junko, before her promotion, when she was required to take work home in order to meet certain deadlines. That's long since passed however, and now that office is an extra storage room filled with things that Tomohisa doesn't have the heart to throw away.

The only cluttered place in an otherwise meticulously clean house.

For the time being, Homura will share a room with Madoka until they can empty out the spare room and refurnish it to her liking; Junko's also hoping to ease her slowly into the household.

She doesn't think Madoka minds anyways.

The two are quiet as Madoka clears out space in her closet and dresser for Homura's new clothes. They're halfway done when Madoka can no longer pretend that nothing is wrong and grabs Homura's hand, forcing her to look at her.

"What's wrong, Homura-chan? Is—" Madoka drops her voice lower, "is it a witch?"

Homura's cat ears aren't visible, but Madoka still doesn't really know how that works.

Homura closes her eyes. A witch? Maybe. But it was more than that—it was this sense of foreboding that she had; the usual feeling she gets when something goes wrong during one of her timelines.

"Amy..." Homura feels her heart clench suddenly.

Amy is another one of those constants that helps tie Homura down to her sanity; she doesn't know what will happen if something happens to her.

"Did something happen to Amy?" Madoka stares at her in worry.

"I-I need to find her," Homura states dizzily.

She just bought Amy a collar and she still needed to let her try the new treats; she had promised her that she would reward her for walking Madoka home the other day.

"I'll help you look for her! Maybe she went back to your apartment? Did you tell her that you were going to live here now?"

Homura thinks back and realizes that she hadn't told her. She had been too mad at what Amy had said, and then hadn't had a chance to tell her since she was already gone by the time they were done eating.

"I-I'm going to go check," Homura says as she looks at the clock.

It's close to eight now, and she sometimes has dinner with Amy before she goes witch hunting, so it was possible she was there.

"I'll come with you!" Madoka tells her.

Homura knows she's not going to take no for an answer so she doesn't bother saying anything.

They exit the room, and Madoka zeroes in on her mother who is on the couch, playing with Takkun as Tomohisa puts the finishing touches on dinner.

"Mama! We're going to go look for Amy—she's probably at Homura's house waiting for her."

Junko glances at the time; dinner is soon but it doesn't seem like this is something that can wait.

"Ahh, alright, I'll drive you there," Junko says as she puts the toy car down.

Tatsuya pouts at her. "Mama! Let's play!"

"Mama will be right back, Takkun! I just have to drive Madoka and Homura somewhere really fast. Be a good boy for Mama, okay?"

"A-Actually I think it's better if I just walk there," Homura tells her and Junko straightens up with a frown. "Amy doesn't really like riding in the car. And we might find her along the way," Homura explains nervously.

"Please, Mama?" Madoka begs and Junko sighs.

"Alright, but whether or not you find her, please call me within an hour, and I will come to pick you two up, alright?"

"Thanks, Mama!" Madoka hugs her mom and Homura mumbles her thanks, before the two are racing out the door.

"Mama!" Takkun tugs at his mom's sleeve. She sits back down and throws her arms around him. "Kitty!"

"Yeah, Takkun, they're going to bring the kitty back home," she agrees.

"Kitty!" he repeats.

/

"H-Homura-chan! W-Wait!"

Madoka tries her best to keep up with Homura, but the other girl is augmented with magic and easily outpaces her. There's a desperation Madoka feels as she struggles to reach out to the girl who's running further, and further away. Finally she can't continue, stopping short.

She coughs, placing her hands on her knees. Tears gather in her eyes, hating herself for being so weak and slow.

"Madoka, are you alright?" A familiar voice calls out to her.

She looks up in shock to see Homura standing in front of her. She had heard; she had come back.

"H-Homura-chan?"

"I'm sorry, I forgot you wouldn't be able to keep up," Homura apologizes. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah!" Madoka says as she hurriedly wipes at her eyes. "I'm sorry, Homura-chan, I said I'd help you find Amy but I'm just slowing you down."

"It's alright," Homura tells her.

She moves forward and Madoka suddenly feels her world tilt as Homura lifts her off her feet, easily carrying her.

"Hold on," she warns her.

Madoka quickly wraps her arms around Homura's neck even as her cheeks flush as pink as her hair; she thinks she'll never get used to this.

"It's dark enough that I can use the shadows to my advantage," is all Homura says, before she jumps high up and uses a nearby wall as a platform, launching herself even higher.

She lands with light steps on the roof of a nearby house.

"H-Homura-chan!" Madoka squeaks out as she feels the wind against her face. "W-Won't they see us?"

"No, they shouldn't be able to," her answer, and Madoka realizes that at some point, Homura had transformed, and for some reason the scenery around them has become washed out.

"E-Eh?"

"This is my real power," Homura murmurs to her as they soar through the grey sky. "I can stop time for a little bit, and anyone I touch will continue to move as long as I don't let go."

"T-Time...?"

Why did that sound so familiar...

Just as sudden, there's the sound of the unwinding of a clock, and the world returns to normal as Homura lands on top of another random roof. Madoka can feel an electric pulse run through them, and she gasps.

"W-What was that?"

Homura's surprised it had affected Madoka, but she stares off to the distance.

"A witch's barrier."

And there was that feeling again, stronger than ever.

Amy is probably in there, somehow. Will she make it in time? Or is she already too late?

Madoka's hand gripping her shirt interrupts her thoughts. She suddenly remembers: if she can't believe in hope, she can believe in Madoka.

"We'll save Amy, right Madoka?" Homura asks as she leaps closer to the barrier.

Though her hands are trembling, she steadies them, and nods even though Homura can't see her.

"Yeah, of course we will, Homura-chan. Of course we will."

/

As Tomoe Mami patrols the streets of Mitakihara with Kyuubey, she finds herself lost in her thoughts as she thinks to yesterday. She can't suppress her shudder, quickly turning her thoughts to her new allies that she has more or less gained overnight.

After the accident, it had always been Mami and Kyuubey, and then Mami and... someone else and Kyuubey, and then back to Mami and Kyuubey again.

And then suddenly, it was Mami and Kyuubey, and Homura and Sayaka and Madoka, and suddenly the world was brighter again.

It's not the first time she recalls what would have happened if Homura hadn't been there. She draws her arms closer to her body, as if fighting off the cold even though she has her barrier of magic protecting her from the simple elements.

/Is something the matter, Mami?/

Mami smiles lightly to the white creature resting on her shoulders. He's not warm, but his mere presence is comforting, like always.

/Nothing, I was just thinking about Akemi-san and the others. That's all/

/It's too bad Sayaka couldn't join you tonight/

Mami frowns as she's reminded of the very short text message sent from the other girl, but shakes off her disappointment; like she had told Madoka earlier, Sayaka wasn't obligated to hunt witches either since she hadn't yet contracted as well.

Plus, maybe it was for the best...

/That's alright, I have you with me, Kyuubey/

/Yes, but I won't be able to help you if something happens like yesterday Mami/

Mami visibly shudders once more as a nearby reflection of metal has her recalling the sharp metal teeth that had almost ended her life.

/I was...distracted, but it won't happen again/

There's no way Mami could live with herself if she made her juniors cry again, though, thinking about the tears Madoka and Sayaka had shed for her had made her feel happier than it should have.

/Still, it wouldn't hurt to have more magical girls around. Especially Kaname Madoka. Her potential is immeasurable/

This makes Mami pause. Kyuubey's words just doesn't make any sense to Mami. As far as she can see, Madoka is a normal, happy girl, with a good family and no real problems whatsoever.

What exactly makes her so powerful?

In fact, did Madoka even want to become a magical girl? She is obviously content with her life, and Mami can respect that.

Which is why, especially with what had happened yesterday, Mami feels that perhaps it's better to not have regular, normal girls, like Madoka or Sayaka involved. Yes, it meant she wouldn't be able to hunt witches with them, but Homura is more than capable enough. And it doesn't mean that she would have to stop talking to them since they know all about magic.

She can still have friends, and still have someone who will fight with her; the best of both worlds.

She worries though that they're maybe in too deep, and they might end up contracting anyways... especially Sayaka.

/Mami!/

Mami pulls herself from her thoughts to concentrate on the task at hand: her soul gem is shining brighter, signaling that they're getting closer to a witch.

/Hmm. Interesting, I'm also detecting two human signatures nearby. Considering their levels, one of them is Akemi Homura, and the other is Kaname Madoka/

Mami concentrates, and she too can somewhat feel another magical girl signature a bit away. Recalling their earlier conversation at school, and the empty inbox on her phone, she knows there hasn't been a change of plans. Madoka and Homura should be home, or at least some place safe.

Something must have happened.

She picks up her pace.

/Let's go, Kyuubey!/

/Sure, Mami!/

\

There's only a handful of things that can phase the normally stoic Homura, and most these things usually centered around Madoka.

Which means that Amy is automatically placed into that same category, since saving Amy was Madoka's first wish, and she had promised Madoka she'd look after Amy back in their original timeline. Now, after every reset, Homura always makes sure to check on Amy so that Madoka won't make a contract to save the cat's life.

It's a given then, that she grows rather fond of Amy, who doesn't care what Homura tells her, as long as she provides her with food and shelter. Amy doesn't call Homura a liar when she tells her about her past; Amy trusts her, and lets her pet her even though her hands are forever stained and her mind is broken beyond repair.

Amy is, and will always be Amy.

This timeline and the previous has been different though. With her additional powers, she has been able to communicate with Amy, and their sudden understanding brings them even closer, and through it all, Amy is still Amy.

So it's no wonder then, that when they enter the barrier, and Homura eventually spots the black cat surrounded by an alarming amount of familiars, her entire world stops, and her pulse sky rockets as she internally panics.

She places Madoka down, and glances to the smaller girl; she'll have to leave Madoka alone in order to save Amy.

She should've left her outside, or better yet, at home.

Why couldn't she say no to this girl?

She clamps her hand on Madoka's shoulder and concentrates as she looks up at her.

"Homura-chan?"

There's a sudden glow around them. Madoka's eyes widen as she notices that Homura is now dressed in a black collared shirt, and blinks when she feels something warm surrounding her—

"Eh?" she stares in wonder as she notices she's now wearing the outer jacket to Homura's magical girl costume.

"It'll provide you with some protection—" Homura's eyes narrow when the familiars notice the spike in magic and turn to them, "—and will enable me to focus my magic on you even if I'm not right by you. Please trust me, Madoka. I will protect you—and I will save Amy."

She crouches low, and before Madoka can reply, she's gone and the familiars are rushing forward to meet her.

/

As Mami crashes through the barrier, guns drawn and wisps of magical energy from her transformation disappearing, she takes in the scene around her with the skill of an experienced marksman in three seconds.

One: Madoka is off to the side, sitting on the floor and eyes wide as something careens towards her.

Two: Homura is clutching something in her right arm as three familiars surround her, and the building sized witch towers over her as she expertly dodges the dark tendrils threatening to pierce through her.

Three: there's a fourth familiar that Homura has noticed that is barreling towards Madoka, and as she reaches for her shield, whatever she had been expecting to happen, didn't, as a fifth familiar catches the girl by the leg.

Mami already has the trigger pulled, aiming to kill the two familiars. The one trying to attack Madoka disappears, but she's too late for the other one. Homura stumbles as something trips her; it's not enough to cause her to fall, but it's *enough,* and even as Mami summons more weapons, she can only watch as one of the dark tendrils veers suddenly and rips through Homura's defenses easily. There's a shower of dark liquid, blood splattering, as a fist sized hole is punched through Homura's side.

"HOMURA-CHAN!"

Mami fires, easily killing the additional familiars appearing around them and rushes forward, eyes still watching as the momentum from the dark tendril sends Homura sailing in an arch. There's a sickening thud as she lands harshly onto the floor, only a short distance away from where Madoka is.

"NO! NO!"

Madoka rushes to Homura's side as more familiars appear, intent on finishing the girl off.

Mami won't have any of it though.

She immediately fires all her muskets at once, destroying the approaching familiars. The flashy lights and the loud sounds finally catches Madoka's attention.

"M-Mami-san...?"

"Please stay calm, Kaname-san," Mami tells her as she draws up another line of firearms. "Akemi-san should be okay; I need to take care of this and then I will help her!"

And then she can't talk anymore because she's too busy killing and seeking revenge.

"Homura-chan..." Madoka's hands are shaking as she's watching the blood continue to drain from Homura's body. "No...please...stop..."

She brings her hands to the open wound, trying to stem the flow of blood like what her training had taught her—but they never mentioned what to do when there's a giant gaping hole. It's not working and she's openly sobbing as she notices how still Homura's cat ears are, and the shallow breathing of her breath.

"No..." She grips Homura's shirt, vaguely noting that Homura is now wearing her school uniform, that the warmth surrounding her from Homura's jacket is gone. She places her head on Homura's chest and sobs. "O-Open your eyes, Homura-chan...please..."

/This is bad, Madoka! She's losing a lot of blood, but you can save her! Just make a wish!/

Madoka raises her head and her eyes pierce through Kyuubey's own.

"Wish...?"

/You can wish to save her!/

Her eyes widen. She can still save Homura.

"I," she swallows hard, and wipes her tears away with the only clean part on the back of her hands. "I wish tha—"

A hand around her wrist stops her. She turns to see Homura's arm raised, and her head slightly tilted. Lavender eyes staring at her.

"H-Homura-chan!" Madoka immediately takes the girl's hand in her own, ignoring the red that she smears on pale, white skin.

/Madoka, you need to make a wish now before—/

"I'm fine," Homura says, voice sounding surprisingly strong as she glares at Kyuubey. "She doesn't need to make a wish, I'm fine."

"No! How can you say you're f-fine! When you—that—!"

"Kaname-san," a calm voice pulls her from her thoughts as a warm hand is placed on her shoulder. "Please, calm down," Mami tells her as she kneels next to her to examine Homura's injury.

"Calm down? CALM DOWN? HOW CAN YOU TELL ME TO CALM DOWN?"

"Please," Mami insists.

She holds one finger to her lips while she points above them.

Expecting to see the warped world of the witch's barrier, Madoka looks up to see the brick walls of buildings surrounding them, and a half moon peeking out in the sky. They're back, in the real world. Mami had defeated the witch and the barrier was already disappearing.

"We're lucky the barrier was in an alleyway, but please keep your voice down, Kaname-san," Mami says calmly even as she places shaking hands to Homura's open wound. "I'm going to heal her now."

Madoka stares at her in shock. "Y-You can save her?"

Mami nods, before she concentrates on her own magic. She sends it through her hands to Homura's body, trying to rebuild the flesh, and the blood that Homura is still losing. There's resistance as Homura's own magic fights against hers, and she grits her teeth as she tries to push through.

She barely manages to heal it only a little, before she pulls away, breathing hard at the exertion. She had poured a lot of magic into that, but it felt like she hadn't made a dent at all.

"Mami-san?" Madoka is watching her, wide-eyed.

Mami wipes the sweat from her brow with her sleeve and shakes her head.

"S-Something's wrong. I can't heal her properly. I don't understand—it's worked before."

Having finally completely distanced her soul gem from the pain in her physical body, Homura struggles to sit up. Both girls gasp at Homura's movement.

"Stop, Homura-chan!"

"Akemi-san, please, you need to lie back down while I figure this out."

Homura sighs and lets them push her back. She shifts her right arm and gestures to Mami, completely ignoring her own wound.

"Please, can you heal her?"

Amy is nestled in the crook of her arm, no doubt what Homura had been holding earlier.

Noting the look on Homura's face, Mami nods. "I-I will try."

Mami takes the unconscious cat in her arms, wincing when she spots the giant gash on her side. She places her hand above the wound and like earlier, pushes her own magic into Amy's body. There's relief when she easily bypasses a very weak barrier, and easily heals all of Amy's wounds.

"...meow," the cat's eyes flutter open.

As Mami moves her hand away, Amy licks her as if in thanks. Mami sets her onto the floor.

"It worked," Mami states in wonder, watching as Amy bounds over to Homura and gently headbutts her cheek.

"Meow."

"I'm glad you're okay Amy," Homura whispers softly.

"Meow."

"Mami-san," Madoka turns to Mami for instructions.

Mami can see the fear in her eyes. "I don't understand why my magic isn't working—it's healing, but it's really slow."

Madoka nods; she understands. She needs to make a wish.

As if sensing her thoughts, Homura turns to Mami. "Tomoe Mami, do you have any grief seeds on you?"

"Ah, I have the one the witch dropped earlier and another one at home. Do you need it, Akemi-san?" Mami asks as she reaches in her pocket to pull out the new grief seed.

"Not yet, I have extras and they might be enough but..." Mami nods in understanding. Homura looks at Madoka. "Madoka? Can you promise me something?"

"W-What, Homura-chan?" Madoka is afraid that Homura's going to ask her to take care of Amy, in case—

"Please, promise me you'll never make a contract."

"W-Wha—"

"Please." She's pleading now and they can both hear the desperation in her voice. "M-Madoka, please promise me. Please."

"I-I—"

"Please," she whispers again.

It sounds like a death wish.

Madoka closes her eyes as she feels tears gather. "I promise," she chokes out.

"Thank you," Homura sounds relieved as she sighs. "Okay, I'm going to try and heal myself."

"A-Alright, Akemi-san," Mami replies.

Madoka can only stare.

Homura concentrates, piecing back together the mental links between her soul gem and her body.

The physical pain hits her all at once.

"Ow," she gasps out.

Amy licks her cheek in comfort.

"Homura-chan..."

She changes her ring into her soul gem, giving them a clear view of the dark spots lingering in murky purple.

Unlike Mami, who possesses a stronger control of magic and can heal without the straight use of her soul gem, Homura needs to use the gem as a medium to heal her own wounds. She holds her soul gem to her wound, and slowly concentrates. It's a long process with very little gain; she only has 20% of the hole repaired when she flops back down, struggling to catch her breath.

It's still better than what Mami had done, prompting the blonde to wonder if Homura is naturally resistant to other magic.

Just as Homura moves to summon her shield to grab her spare grief seeds, Mami steps in.

"Let me," Mami murmurs almost distractedly as she gently places a grief seed next to Homura's soul gem.

It's the first time Madoka witnesses a cleansing. She watches with morbid fascination as the grey seed turns dark black, and Homura's soul gem turns back to a light purple.

Before the soul gem is completely clean though, Mami pulls the seed away, and drops it into an opened compartment on Kyuubey's back.

"I-It's not done though?" Madoka is confused but Mami shakes her head.

"The weaker the witch, the less it can absorb from a soul gem. Unfortunately, the one we fought was strong, but not strong enough to completely clean Akemi-san's soul gem. Anymore and the witch will hatch once more."

/That much won't heal her completely either/ Kyuubey interrupts as he watches as Homura continues to her task. /Your magical powers seem more and more disadvantageous, Akemi Homura. Physical manifestation of your magic grants you greater agility, and more sensitivity to detecting magic, but at the same time, the physical manifestations affect your mental state as well as creating more resistance between you and defensive magic. This is why I told you to make a wish, Kaname Madoka. She'll need to use a numerous amount of grief seeds to heal an injury that size; a waste if you ask me. It'll be more efficient to gain another magical girl who can help destroy more witches to gather more grief seeds in the long run/

Homura grits her teeth, trying to ignore Kyuubey's words. Amy hisses at him in her stead.

Madoka blinks in shock. "W-what—"

Kyuubey thought that using grief seeds to save a life was a waste...?

"Kyuubey, please, can you leave us alone for now?"

The disapproving voice that Mami has stops Homura from healing briefly. She raises her head to look at Mami's face; she's never really heard her use that tone on Kyuubey before.

She's not disappointed.

The blonde is frowning at Kyuubey, not at all giving him her usual bright smile. Homura stares, distracted, until a soft paw is on her cheek and Amy is meowing at her, reminding her that she's still bleeding out, though not as much as before.

She continues to rebuild her flesh with great difficulty.

"Ah." She stops when her gem has darkened considerably and Mami notes with concern how little purple spots are left; Homura's wound is now less than 50% healed.

"I have more in my shield," Homura says as struggles to sit up.

This time, Madoka and Mami help her, ignoring the fact that they can now see and feel that her clothes are soaked with blood.

Homura transforms, and Madoka is at least glad to see her magical costume is back to normal and clean. It doesn't last long, however, and there's a spot of red slowly building on Homura's side.

Homura reaches inside her shield, and pulls out a small tin container. She opens it and retrieves a grief seed. She cleans her soul gem and Madoka feels her stomach knot when she sees the purple is still very murky looking when the grief seed is pulled away. Unaffected, Homura takes out another one. This one cleans her gem completely.

She easily burns through the rest of her stock of grief seeds. By the time her wound is healed, her soul gem is once again filled with black spots. Not at all bothered that Kyuubey has disappeared somewhere, Homura places the spent seeds back into their container and then stuffs it back in her shield.

Madoka lifts Homura's shirt despite her protests. She looks at the pink flesh that has replaced the bleeding hole, and throws her arms around Homura's neck, crying in relief.

"Thank goodness, Homura-chan," Madoka's tears soak her shirt but she's use to it now. She hisses suddenly when Madoka leans on her now healed wound; it will still be sensitive for another day or two.

"Ah! Sorry, does it hurt?"

"Just a little," Homura lies and Madoka moves so that she's not leaning on her side.

"Ahem," Mami clears her throat. "Now that the worse is behind us, I believe we should get out of here and clean up."

They look at each other, evaluating their appearances. Homura's newly transformed outfit has a huge circle of blood. Mami has blood on her own clothes, but luckily that is a quick fix once she discards her transformation. The worst off is Madoka though, who is still wearing her white dress from earlier; her hands are also stained and her dress is smeared with dark maroon.

Things that horror movies are made of.

Mami reverts back to her clean school uniform, though her hands are still dirty. She takes off her jacket, handing that off to Madoka who will use it to somehow hide the blood stains. Homura creates a new magical jacket to replace her old one; they decide it's better to have her with her ears showing, than clothed in literally blood soaked clothes.

If Homura hadn't been so tired, she would've lent Madoka her own white jacket. It is a longer than Mami's, but seeing as she could barely keep her eyes open, the smaller girl has to settle for the beige jacket that still doesn't cover her white dress all the way.

If someone looked closely, they would definitely see the stains peeking through.

"Ready?" Mami asks.

Madoka nods and they both help Homura stand on wobbly legs.

"W-What about..." Madoka glances down at the visible darkened stain on the ground and swallows heavily.

"...this area is secluded enough that it will take a few days for anyone to discover it," Mami murmurs softly. "At most, someone will be sent to investigate, but it will be written off as... something happening to a stray animal."

Madoka doesn't want to know how Mami knows this.

With Homura in the middle and Madoka and Mami supporting her at her sides, the three of them head towards Mami's apartment as Amy rides on Homura's shoulder.

As they walk, Madoka feels like she's forgetting to do something.

\

The walk to Mami's is a very slow process.

They have to avoid the main streets, and keep towards the shadows due to Homura's ears and tail, and due to Madoka's alarming state of appearance. It also doesn't help that Homura is falling asleep on her feet, and Mami is unable to use magic to carry her because of her darkened soul gem.

Homura stumbles again and Mami and Madoka steady her on feet.

"Hmmm, this won't do, it's taking too long," Mami says.

She glances to Homura who's nodding off, though her ears twitch in acknowledgement.

"What should we do, Mami-san?" Madoka asks as she shifts uncomfortably.

Homura is light, but she's getting tired. Her stomach suddenly growls, and she blushes, remembering that they haven't had dinner yet.

She doesn't even know if she can eat though...

Mami looks around to where they're at now, brightening when she realizes that just down the street, there's public restrooms.

That always meant vending machines nearby.

Luckily, it's late enough and they're in a quiet neighborhood, so they shouldn't run into many people at all here.

"Alright, you two stay here while I go wash up and then get us some refreshments; maybe it'll help Akemi-san wake up."

"Okay."

Mami helps Madoka bring Homura over to sit on the ledge of one of the large flower planters scattered around the city. As soon as they're seated, Homura automatically leans against the smaller girl as Mami heads to the bathroom.

"Meow," Amy jumps into Madoka's lap and settles down for a quick nap.

"Me too, Amy. Me too," Madoka agrees as she pets Amy fondly.

She giggles softly when Homura nuzzles her face against Madoka's neck, purring lightly; she is definitely falling asleep.

Just as Madoka feels her own eyes drooping, a familiar ring tone echoes around them.

She wakes up immediately.

She had forgotten to call her mom back.

/

When Mami returns with drinks and a few wet paper towels for Madoka to clean up with, she's greeted by a very panicked looking Madoka sitting by a Homura that is looking a lot more alert.

"Kaname-san? What's wrong?" Mami asks as she hands her the papers, before giving Homura a box of strawberry milk who accepts it with suddenly perked ears.

"I-I was supposed to call my mom back—like ten minutes ago," Madoka explains. She takes the towels and starts wiping her hands nervously. "Thank you, Mami-san, but what should I do? I'm horrible at lying to my mom! And she's already called five times already!"

"Hmm, that is a problem," Mami agrees. She takes a seat besides Madoka.

"It's alright, Madoka," Homura interrupts; she's finished her drink. "Lend me your phone."

"Mm," Madoka blinks, and passes it over to Homura as Mami hands her a cup of tea. "Thanks, Mami-san..."

Homura quickly finds Junko's number and dials it.

"Madoka! Tell me where you are at right now so I can go over there and pick you up to yell at you at home!"

Madoka winces, hearing her mother's voice through the speaker.

"Hello? Junko-san?"

"Homura? Where's Madoka, is something wrong?"

"No, I apologize for not answering your phone call earlier—we were crossing the Ueno overpass and we didn't hear Madoka's phone ringing due to the sound of traffic."

"I...see. And where is Madoka right now?"

"She is here, sitting next to me, but was too scared to call you back so I offered instead."

"Alright. And why exactly did you cross through Ueno? Your house is in the opposite direction."

"I'm sorry, it's my fault. We already checked my house and Amy wasn't there. There was one more place I wanted to visit where Amy frequents. I assumed we would be able to get back in time, but we had to take a detour due to construction."

"Hmm, alright. So where exactly are you heading? Tell me the address; I will pick up you girls there."

Homura looks at Mami in question who nods in permission. Homura gives her the address.

"Alright, I need to help put Takkun to bed, but I will come get you girls as soon as I'm done with that. Stay put."

"Yes, thank you, Junko-san."

click

Madoka sighs in relief. "Thanks, Homura-chan."

Homura nods and gives her back her phone. "We still need to do something about our clothes..."

"We should hurry back," Mami says as she finishes her drink.

Madoka stares at her still almost full cup in wonder; how did they both drink so quickly?

/

With Homura awake to support herself, they make their way back to Mami's apartment without further complications.

As soon as they're inside, Mami turns to the other two girls.

"Alright, now let's see what we can do about your dress, Kaname-san. Akemi-san, you should de-transform now so we can evaluate your uniform as well."

Homura does as told.

Madoka's stomach lurches as she's reminded of Homura's previous injury: instead of the normal beige colour of their school jacket, it is now a disgusting shade of dark-brown. Madoka has no doubts that everything under that is ruined as well, and is just glad the skirt is dark enough to hide the stains.

"...It'll probably be better to throw your whole outfit away, Akemi-san," Mami says instead.

Homura nods in agreement, nose scrunching at the strong smell of blood.

"We might be able to salvage your dress, Kaname-san," Mami tells her as she examines the fabric.

"Will we have enough time?" Madoka asks worriedly, eyes avoiding Homura and her clothes.

"A little elbow grease should do wonders." Mami winks. "Come on, let's get you something to wear while I try and wash this. Akemi-san... you can borrow my shower."

"Meow."

"...yes, Amy, I know..."

/

"...so you know, I'm not mad, I just would like it if you would tell me if you change your plans. And to remember when to call me when I tell you to."

"Yes, I know Mama," Madoka bows her head.

"Ahh, it's too bad about your dress though. I think you should stop drinking hot cocoa, Madoka," Junko sighs out.

Junko then turns to other person in the room who looks even smaller dressed in clothes that are too big for her. Apparently, her clothes had once again been attacked by Madoka's clumsiness, and were still being washed at this 'Tomoe Mami's' place when Junko had arrived to pick them up. Rather than have them wait, Mami had told them she would hand them back tomorrow at school, and since Homura has an extra uniform at home, Junko had felt no obligations to stay.

She had wondered about the blonde's parents though, and makes a mental note to ask Madoka about Mami later.

"Homura," the dark-haired girl looks up sleepily. Poor thing is probably tired from all the fun they had today. "I know you're used to... things being different, but there are rules to living here. It'll take some time, but you'll find out that having rules in the long run will help make you become a better adult in the end. Don't worry, it's not as bad you think it is."

"...yes. I'm sorry..."

"Meow."

"Hm, well, I'm still glad you found Amy though," Junko smiles as she reaches over to pet the cat that's resting on Homura's shoulder. "You live here now, so don't be making us worry, alright?"

Homura has a feeling Junko is referring to her as well.

"Well, no harm, no foul. Go on, Papa should've heated up dinner for you two by now."

Madoka gives her mother a smile and a hug, while Homura murmurs a thanks in response.

"Go on," Junko says again, and swats Madoka's behind, earning her an eep as the girl exits to the living room.

Junko laughs when Homura makes sure to steer clear of Junko's hands as she follows after Madoka.

/

Homura's not sure how she even makes it to the bed later on, but she's too tired to even dream, and for once she sleeps straight through the night.

\

"...Kyuubey?"

/Hm? What is it Mami? Can't sleep again?/

She turns and faces towards the white creature resting on his designated pillow on her bed. She can make out his figure in the not quite darkness, and knows he's looking at her.

"...What really happens when a soul gem becomes completely black...?"

/Hm? Haven't I explained this to you? You won't be able to use your magic anymore/

She shifts uncomfortably.

"When Akemi-san was healing herself, back there...I felt... something strange from her..."

/Do you mean her magic? Well, I'm still not sure of her origin/

"No... Kyuubey... there were times when I felt...well, it felt like... it was similar to the feeling...before a grief seed hatches into a witch... only... it came from her soul gem..."

/...Well, Akemi Homura's magic is a lot more sensitive to witches in general; it wouldn't be strange for her magic to reflect that, the darker her soul gem becomes/

"Kyuubey... What really happens when a soul gem becomes black?" Mami whispers as she closes her eyes.

She knows that if she opens them, she'll be tempted to look at him, but doesn't think she'll be able to look at those menacing red eyes the same way anymor**e.**

AN: As always, thank you for the reviews :) Especially those of you who review almost every chapter. You know who you people are! (I know who you are too. yes that sounds creepy)

Anyways, yay, another chapter. This one is the one that has given me the most problems so far as I tried to make things seem like that could happen. If things aren't believable, well, you'll be disappointed with the chapters in the future so I already apologize for that. Probably the main thing that stands out is: with her speed and time magic how did Homura end up getting hurt? Answer: Because she did. First, take in her mental health and the fact that she's more emotional in this timeline which means she's not thinking as clearly. Second, the fact that Madoka is also there as well and she has to split her attention between protecting her and on the familiars as well as the witch (I wonder if I should capitalize Witch..) and that she has to protect/save Amy. Homura is strong but not invincible; she is prone to mistakes and I bet she has been injured plenty of times during all the timelines but we just have never seen it.

Uhm, I do realize my Homura isn't as angry?(she always yells at Madoka XD) and emotionless as the one in the series; if she's too OOC I apologize for that too. I think the Homura in this story is a lot more sad... and will continue to be sad. Poor sad little Homura-chan. In fact, everyone's sad.

Except Kyuubey. Still planning what to do with him...

I have a feeling I won't be able to finish this...

Regardless, thanks again for reading, whoever you are. This is the 2nd longest chapter so far btw, and they will gradual start getting a little bit shorter.

Chapter 9: falling

When Madoka tries shaking her awake the next day, Homura groans and tries to bury herself further into the bed.

Her body aches, her mind is pounding and her arms feel like lead. Magic helped make her physically stronger, but for someone with lower healing abilities, her body is still protesting from yesterday's abuse and there's a hollow feeling that she usually gets from using too much magic at once.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka stares down at Homura in worry, noting the slightly flushed complexion on the normally pale girl. She had no idea that magical girls still got sick. "Homura-chan? Mama's going to want to check on you, do you think you can put your ears and tail away?"

Homura cracks an eye open and blearily sees a pink figure hovering above her. She lets out a small whine but the ears retract and the tail is gone after a moment.

"Good girl," Madoka says softly and gives her an affectionate stroke on the head before she's straightening up to tell her mom that Homura is too sick to go to school today.

As Homura drifts in and out of sleep, she vaguely feels a hand on her forehead, and a voice mentioning her temperature. The feeling and the atmosphere is so familiar that the words are out of her mouth though she's not consciously aware of it.

It catches the other two occupants in the room by surprise, and the one closest to Homura murmurs words of comfort and she responds with a sigh before she drifts into a much more relaxed sleep.

Junko holds a finger to her lips and Madoka nods and they both leave the room quietly.

\\

/It's a good thing you didn't get into too much trouble, Kaname-san/

/Yeah, the hot cocoa thing was a good idea too—though Mama kinda sighed in resignation and told me to stop drinking hot cocoa.../

/Tea is a very good substitute, Kaname-san. How is Akemi-san doing?/

/Ahh, Homura-chan looked awful this morning. Which reminds me, I didn't know magical girls still got sick, Mami-san. I thought that magic would protect from things like that?/

/Magic enhances the body, but doesn't make it invincible. It's why we can get injured as well. Plus, it is most likely due to Akemi-san's use of healing magic yesterday. Her body is naturally resistant to that magic, which probably put even more of a strain on her body considering how much she had to use to fix her injury. Even a magical girl has a limit on how much magic they can use continuously/

/What happens when they use too much?/

There's a pause as Mami considers her answer.

/Mental and physical exhaustion; Akemi-san will most likely sleep through the whole day as her body tries to re-balance itself. By the way, Kaname-san, is Miki-san not in school today?/

/Ah, y-yeah, Sayaka-chan isn't here. She wasn't there at our usual meeting spot this morning and when I called her house, her mother said she was sick/

/Ah, that does explain why she cancelled on me yesterday/

/Oh?/

/Yes, remember, Miki-san was supposed to join me for the patrol last night, but a little before our set time she messaged me saying that she wasn't feeling too well. Perhaps it became worse this morning?/

/Oh, maybe. I had completely forgotten... /

And here Madoka remembers how Sayaka had seemed after school yesterday and wonders if it's related to that...

/Ahhh, Mami-san, sorry, I have to pay attention now; the teacher is calling my row to read. I'll talk to you more at lunch?/

/Sure, see you then, Kaname-san/

/Bye Mami-san!/

/

Sayaka stares at the bowl of soup in front of her but she finds herself with no appetite. Her stomach continues to flip flop as her thoughts continue to go round and round as Homura's words echo in her mind.

She's been in this listless state ever since she came home yesterday and her parents were immediately worried about their usually vibrant daughter acting less than normal. It's why she's now sitting in bed instead of at school, laughing and learning with Madoka and Hitomi. Though, she's not sure if she's quite in the mood to laugh.

There's a part of her that wants to deny everything that Homura had said—call her crazy and demented and to just ignore her.

There's another part of her though, a part in the back of her mind that whispers things and tells her that everything is true.

And that part is the part that scares her.

Because then that means that she—

And then there are memories that she remembers from some place, that reaffirms everything that Homura had told her. They are fragments and piecemeal that do not tell the whole story, but it's enough for her to remember a dark red stage with her as the main attraction. Music and violins and girls that remind her of Hitomi as Madoka and someone...familiar pleads for her to stop.

Stop what?

Stop fighting.

She grips her hair in frustration. Just yesterday she had been on the verge of helping Kyousuke, of stepping in and being able to bring his dreams back to reality and now she's busy beating herself up over these stupid things the transfer student had told her.

Thinking has never been Sayaka's main strength and at this point she feels like she's going crazy trying to figure out the solution to some strange problem that she doesn't even know.

Nodding to herself, she takes the tray with soup and places it onto the table besides her bed and throws off her blankets.

She's had enough thinking and needs a lot more doing.

And even though she doesn't want to, she needs to talk with Homura again and at least gain another piece of this puzzle she's trying to put together.

\\

Despite Tomohisa's insistence that they stay in case Homura needs anything, she waves him off and tells him she is merely going to sleep and that him taking a restless Takkun to the park is better than making the young boy try and keep quiet while Homura rests.

So a still tired Homura is now alone in the Kaname house and after finishing the soup Tomohisa had prepared for lunch, she is in the midst of crawling back into bed when her phone rings suddenly. She fumbles with the covers before reaching for her device on Madoka's table.

Thinking it's perhaps Madoka or Junko checking on her, she doesn't bother glancing at the ID and flips her phone open.

"Hello?"

The familiar voice has the blood draining from her face as the caller explains the reason for calling her.

/

Classes after lunch always make her sleepy and today is no exception. Madoka yawns once more as she struggles to keep awake so that she can take notes for both Homura and Sayaka. It doesn't help though, that the history teacher's voice hits this certain tone that tends to lull everyone to sleep as noted by all the propped up notebooks in the classroom.

Kin kon Kin Kon Kin Kon

A few students are roused from their nap as the overhead intercom chimes.

"Will a Kaname Madoka please head to the administration's office? There's a phone call waiting for you."

Surprised at the interruption, Madoka looks up and the teacher nods to her.

"Kaname-san?"

"A-ah! Okay—" Madoka quickly closes her notebook and places it on her desk before sharing a look with Hitomi and then she's heading towards the administrative building.

\\

Sayaka sighs as she scratches her head absently.

After almost getting into an argument with her mom about needing to get some fresh air, she realizes that she is wasting her time since it will still be a few hours from now until school lets out. Trying to message Madoka is also a bust since the girl has turned off her phone during classes.

So now she's hanging out around the school, looking like a delinquent and feeling like one. If any truancy officers catch her they're going to want to know why she's not inside

and she's sure they're not going to accept her reason of being sick but needing to talk to someone that is taking notes for the class she is currently ditching.

Sayaka suddenly looks to the school gates. She remembers Homura mentioning that the school entrance was in distance of Kyuubey's powers. She isn't sure that this will work since Kyuubey doesn't know she's here, but she tries anyways.

/Madoka?/

Pause.

/Mami-san?/

Sayaka sighs again. Nope, that didn't work at all. So now she just has to wait three hours until school finally finishes while making sure she's not caught for not attending classes.

Easy.

/

"What?!" Madoka's voice echoes throughout the office and she gives a nervous look around before lowering her voice. "What do you mean she's gone, Papa?"

"I'm sorry, Madoka," the regret is apparent in his voice. "I took Takkun to the park to play so that it would be quiet enough for Homura-chan to rest, but when we came back she wasn't in the house."

Madoka chews on her lip fearfully. "I-Is her stuff still there?"

Tomohisa nods even though he knows his daughter can't see. "Everything's still here. She changed her clothes though..."

Madoka thinks. "What about her phone? Have you tried calling her? Is Amy there? Maybe she knows where Homura-chan is...?"

"I'm sorry Madoka, Amy left sometime in the morning and I don't see Homura-chan's phone anywhere. I don't have her number either which is why I'm calling you."

"Papa, can you please have me checked out of the school? I want to go look for her."

"Madoka..."

"I know, Papa, but this is important! I... don't think it's good to leave Homura-chan alone..." thoughts of Homura lying somewhere bleeding to death flashes through her mind and she shuts her eyes to will the image away.

Her father's calm voice draws back her attention and she opens them again. "Alright, Madoka. And if Mama asks, it was Papa's idea, okay?"

"Yes! Thank you Papa!"

/

As Sayaka decides she should wait somewhere less conspicuous instead of by the school, a familiar pink figure exiting the school gates garners her attention and she mentally gives a cheer for her luck.

"Madoka!" she calls out to the running girl who turns to her in surprise and promptly runs into some nearby bushes. "Aah…sorry!" Sayaka quickly moves to help her out and brushes stray leaves from Madoka's hair.

"S-Sayaka-chan? What are you doing here? Aren't you sick?" Madoka asks as she tries to straighten out her shirt.

"Y-yeah, about that," Sayaka gives her a sheepish look.

Madoka suddenly remembers why she was rushing. "Uhm, well, I'm glad you're not sick, Sayaka-chan! But I'm in a hurry so—"

"Wait! I just wanted to know if you know the transfer student's number—I need to talk to her!"

The way Madoka stiffens at the mention of Homura doesn't go unnoticed by Sayaka.

"Madoka?"

Madoka shakes her head and looks close to tears.

"What's wrong!? Did the transfer student do something to you? Did she yell—"

"No! Homura-chan didn't do anything! S-She's missing!"

"What?" Sayaka stares at her in surprise. "Did she not go to school today? Maybe she's just—"

"N-No," Madoka shakes her head again. "A-A lot of things happened yesterday, and I need to find her, just in case something else happens!"

"Wait wait wait," Sayaka places a hand to her forehead; why did things involving Homura always give her headache? "Can you explain what happened from the top?"

"There's no time, Sayaka-chan! I need to find her!"

Sayaka groans. When Madoka got this way it was hard to stop her. "Alright, find her now and explanations later. I'll help you look. Do you know where she could be?"

"I think she might be at her apartment—but, she could also be at the park near my house…It's big enough that she could've hid from Papa easily…"

"Okay, good, you have two potential places. How 'bout we split up then? I'll search her house and you go to the park?"

Madoka debates, biting her lip before she nods. "Alright." The chances of Homura being at either could be 50% or even 0%, and as long as one of them found her… Madoka gives Homura's address to Sayaka.

"Okay, call me if you see her," Sayaka tells her and they go their separate ways.

"Sayaka-chan!" the tomboy turns around to see Madoka waving at her. "Thank you!"

Sayaka grins and gives her a thumbs up. Yeah, this is what a hero is all about.

Setting aside differences to help those in need—even weird and mysterious transfer students.

/

/Your soul gem seems to be on the verge of collapse, Akemi Homura/

Cat ears out and twitching, Homura hisses at the voice that pierces through the haze of her dark swirl of thoughts.

"How did you get in here?" she growls at him though she looks neither intimidating or imposing as she's lying curled up in her bed.

/There was an opening small enough for a cat to crawl through your window/

"Leave," is all she says as she hugs herself closer. "Why are you even here...why..why...always here..."

/You are quite the irregular, Akemi Homura. I still haven't figured out your source of magic, or why your magic differs than the normal. The origins would suggest that one of my kind granted you your wish, but as I am the only one in this region, I have no record of contracting with you or granting any powers that include physical manifestations. I find it fascinating/

"Leave...me..alone," she struggles out as she holds her arms over her head. "leave...leave...leave! GET OUT!"

/I merely want to observe what happens when someone with your magic succumbs to her despair. Perhaps the physical manifestations cause a more powerful witch to to be born? Not that you aren't powerful enough as is, Akemi Homura. With you and Kaname Madoka, there would be enough energy collected to last for years!/

"GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT!" Homura grabs the pillow off her bed and throws it at him. It misses and instead hits the wall harmlessly before sliding down to meet the floor.

/Alright. As it seems you are somehow still holding on, I do have some business to attend to. I look forward to seeing how much energy I can collect from you later, Akemi Homura/

And suddenly he's gone and the relief from the silence wants to make her cry. Except it's not really silence, because how can there be silence when all she can hear are the voices blaming her, telling her that everything is her fault?

She moves her head and holds out her left hand. It's shaking even as she summons her soul gem in her palm and she's not surprised at all to see that it's pitch black. There's one little spot of purple left and she stares at it before letting her hand fall. Her soul gem rolls out of her grasp and comes to rest atop the mattress.

Too many boxes—
and,
they,
all,
fell,
down.

/

As Sayaka reaches the older district that housed Homura's apartment, her blood runs cold as she spots a familiar white creature sitting on a nearby street post.

/Miki Sayaka. It seems you are close to making a decision to your wish. Will you—/

Heedless of the few people walking in the otherwise quiet area, Sayaka rushes to Kyuubey and grabs him roughly before using her speed to pitch him as far as she can throw him.

"I don't know what the hell you did with her! But get out of my face before I come back with a bat!" Sayaka yells at him as the other people in the street stare at the strange girl. "What!?" she snaps at them and they all turn away.

Sayaka shakes her head. Ever since Homura had unlocked or whatever'd her memories, thoughts of Kyuubey always made her angry and she has a feeling that whatever is happening to Homura right now isn't good.

"Stupid transfer student..." Sayaka mutters as she races towards the building in the middle of the district.

\\

Madoka's breathless as she reaches the park that now reminds her of hot cocoa and hopeful promises and she's disappointed when she doesn't spot a familiar dark-haired girl sitting on one of the benches. She chokes back a sob and slaps her cheeks in frustration.

She can't cry now; Homura needs her! Somehow or other, she knows the other girl is fighting to stay afloat and if Madoka can get to her, she knows she can save her somehow.

"Homura-chan," Madoka tries to steady her hands against her chest. She takes a deep breath, steeling herself and then she's scanning the area to see if the girl is somewhere else nearby.

/

"Oy! Transfer student! I know you're in there!" As Sayaka continues to pound on the door to Homura's apartment (known by the name plate), she hopes that the neighbors won't call the cops since she's being really, really loud. "Come on! Your owner is looking for you!" *THUD THUD* "I have some milk for you here!" *THUD THUD* "YOU STUPID CAT! OPEN UP ALREADY!"

Just as Sayaka's about to try to kick open the door (never mind that the door opens the wrong way) she gains an idea and runs back to the entrance of the building. She stares up at the strange architecture and numerous windows before she shakes her head and tries to find what she's looking for.

She didn't think she threw him that far...

Paying no mind to the few people passing through the area, Sayaka takes a deep breath.

"Oy! Kyuubey! Where are you, you stupid white rat?!"

Her shout echoes and bounces off the buildings and she fights down her embarrassment as curious eyes glance at her before some of them hurry away.

/I don't understand you humans/ Kyuubey interrupts as he appears right in front of her. /First you want me gone and now you are calling for me. Did you decide on a wish, Miki Sayaka?/

Sayaka shakes her head. "Nope. I want to know how you get into the transfer student's apartment. I notice you don't really use magic mumbo jumbo to get around, so I'm assuming you have to physically move your body to places..."

/Is that your wish?/

"Nope, as if I'd waste that on something like *this*. I just want to know."

Unable to deny a simple question, Kyuubey simply answers. /Hm... the apartments here have high windows that are accessible through a fire escape located in the back. Akemi Homura leaves the window open slightly so that a cat can crawl through/

"Fire escape, huh? Alright... Thanks, I guess," she tells him grudgingly and heads towards the back.

She bites back a grin as she spots a red ladder signaling a very old styled fire escape and then frowns when she notices it'd be impossible to reach it without another ladder.

"Accessible huh..." she sighs out and levels Kyuubey with a glare.

/Accessible for small animals/ Kyuubey clarifies and Sayaka rolls her eyes as she looks around.

She brightens when she spots a wall that she can jump off of in order to reach the ladder; that can work, right?

Done with Kyuubey, Sayaka heads towards the wall and searches for the best way to scale up. "Why are you following me?" she grumbles to the white creature when she sees the white tail out of her peripheral vision.

/A fall from those heights could leave you paralyzed or even worse off. There's a potential for a wish in case that happens/

"Camping for opportunity huh..." Sayaka shakes her head. "Too bad though. I'll have you know I'm great at climbing; I used to climb in trees all the time when I was a kid."

She ignores him completely and concentrates on finding a foothold and grins when she spots an uneven piece of cement jutting out. She's lucky the district here is older and maintenance seems to be one of those things no one seems to care about.

/

Homura's not sure how much time passes but suddenly she hears the sound of glass breaking. If she wasn't already so lost in her mind, she would've moved to investigate would be burglars breaking into her home and instead merely shifts so that she now has a view to the open doorway to her room.

She doesn't know what to expect and when Miki Sayaka walks into her room looking triumphant, she wonders if she's already long past gone because she has no idea why the other girl would be here.

"Ah... sorry about your window," Sayaka says sheepishly as she rubs her neck and laughs. She also mutters something under her breath but Homura doesn't find herself caring enough so she merely rolls back to stare at the wall. "H-Hey! The great Sayaka-chan is here! Shouldn't you be more excited!?"

Disappointed but not surprised at her reception, Sayaka walks closer to the curled up girl. "Hey, transfer student, is everything alr—!" when she's close enough, she notices that the black object lying next to Homura isn't a grief seed like she thought, but is in

fact her soul gem. "What the hell, transfer student!? Why aren't you cleaning your soul gem!?" Sayaka demands as she reaches over and tries to shake Homura out of her stupor. The girl remains limp and Sayaka is surprised by how light the girl is in her hands.

"Oy! Give me a grief seed and I'll use it for you!"

"...I don't have any more..." Homura replies.

"What do you mean, you don't have anymore?" Sayaka asks as she lets Homura fall back onto the bed. She's disturbed by the way the girl just lays there since it reminds her of *atrainstationandshe'salreadygivenup*—and she looks away. "You seem like someone who would keep plenty for a rainy day—so how can you no longer have any?!"

"...I used it all yesterday..."

Sayaka growls angrily. "What the hell is this! You tell me all about turning into witches and whatever else and now YOU'RE the one on the verge of changing and you don't even have any on you!?"

"...It's fine..." Homura says as she closes her eyes, sounding resigned.

"Nuh uh, no way, transfer student," and Sayaka reaches over to slap her on the cheeks. "Wakey wakey, no sleepy for you. Think about..." Sayaka racks her brain trying to remember what Homura had told her yesterday. "...your family and friends!"

Here Homura lets out a laugh that sounds cold and empty. "...I think you have me confused with someone else, Miki Sayaka..."

Sayaka falters. She doesn't know anything about Homura at all and she is probably making things worse. Swallowing hard, she looks at the soul gem that is just hovering on the edge and she tries to think. If only Madoka was here...

She snaps her fingers. Madoka!

"Think about Madoka, transfer student! Think about how she's going to cry when the girl she's out looking for gave up and turned into a witch!"

"...Madoka?" Homura's ears twitch at the name and Sayaka latches on.

"Yeah! Madoka! She sent me looking for you! In fact, she's coming over here right now!" Sayaka lies as she quickly takes out her phone and sends a message to the other girl. "And guess what's going to happen when she gets here and YOU'RE a witch huh?"

"...Madoka..." Homura stirs.

"Yeah, and poor, sweet, little Madoka who only wanted to save her friend is going to be killed by said friend! Is that what you want, transfer student!?"

Homura struggles to sit up and Sayaka reaches over to help her.

"Hey...just hold on alright? Madoka will be here soon," she tells her softly.

Homura doesn't reply and Sayaka decides to keep her mouth shut.

\

When Madoka finally reaches Homura's apartment, she's about to rush to Homura's side when Sayaka suddenly grabs her by the wrist and pulls her back.

"S-Sayaka-chan? Let go, I need to check—"

"Madoka, wait," and the serious tone draws her attention.

"What's wrong?" Madoka can feel her heart pounding in fear.

"Listen, when you go in there, you need to—just be there, okay?"

"Sayaka-chan?" her face shows the confusion she feels.

"Like, no telling her things that she needs to cry it out or talk about it or whatever things you usually say."

"Uhm...okay...?"

"Madoka, I'm serious," and the look on Sayaka's face shows just how serious she is. "She's really, really close to falling, Madoka, and she's only barely holding on because of you."

"F-Falling?" Something, a distant memory, flashes through Madoka's mind—*noIdon'twanttoturnintoa*—

"Her soul gem is almost pitch black," Sayaka tells her. "Whatever happened to her hit her very hard and—when her soul gem gets...completely black... she'll... hatch into a witch."

The floor drops under her as she processes Sayaka's words. "A..A witch? H-Homura-chan's going to turn into a witch...?"

"I already called Mami-san to see if she had any grief seeds—but whatever you three did yesterday seemed to have used them all up and she's out trying to find one right now and will come here as soon as she does."

"D-Does...Mami-san know about...?"

Sayaka shakes her head. "I only told her that the transfer student needed a grief seed." She looks at Madoka seriously. "Anyways, you ready?"

Madoka swallows hard and nods. "Y-Yeah."

Sayaka leads her towards Homura's room and Madoka feels her heart break when she sees the broken girl curled up on the bed.

"Homura-chan," she murmurs softly and the sound of her voice makes the girl's cat ears twitch in acknowledgement.

"Figures," Sayaka mutters as she notices her reaction to Madoka.

Madoka ignores her and is at Homura's side in seconds. "I'm here, Homura-chan," she tells her as she takes a seat on the bed, making sure to not touch the soul gem lying a bit away. She reaches over and pulls the girl close until her head is in her lap. Empty lavender eyes stare up at her and Madoka gives her a gentle smile. "You're okay, Homura-chan," she says as she lays hands atop the girl's head and strokes her cat ears. Homura closes her eyes and unconsciously leans into the touch. "You'll be okay, Homura-chan," she repeats once more.

Sayaka scratches her cheek as she stares at her best friend thoughtfully. If she didn't know any better, it seemed like Madoka was...

/

They sit there in silence with Madoka continuing to pet Homura as they wait for Mami to arrive.

"Hey, Madoka," Sayaka glances at Homura but seeing as she doesn't react to her talking she turns to look at the smaller girl.

"Hmm?"

"I.." Sayaka takes a deep breath and then exhales. "I'm going to confess to Kyousuke."

Madoka's eyes widen and her hand stops moving as she turns to Sayaka in surprise. There's a small whimper from Homura and she murmurs her apologies and continues stroking the soft cat ears before turning back to Sayaka.

"Really?"

Sayaka nods resolutely. "Yes. I'm going to confess and then...I'm going to make a wish to heal him."

Madoka barely remembers to keep her hands moving as she gapes at Sayaka, this time in complete shock. "W-what? E-Even after-the—?"

Sayaka tightens her hands into fists. "I wasn't lying when I said that I wanted people to be able to listen to his music once more. Kyousuke's... important to me, but it's not just because I like him. If you were in the same situation, I would do the same for you, Madoka. And I know you'd do the same for me."

Madoka nods slowly; she would do the same in a heartbeat for her family or Sayaka or Hitomi or... Homura.

"So... I'm going to tell him, and no matter his response, I will become a magical girl."

Madoka knows it's no use trying to convince Sayaka otherwise and she absently scratches Homura's cat ears, earning her a quiet purr that in any other situation would make her melt at the adorableness.

Instead, she's just reminded of how close she's getting to potentially losing all of her friends and that just brings quiet tears to her eyes.

/

"I'm so sorry it took so long, I came here as quickly as I could," Mami breathes out as she rushes into the apartment.

"No need to apologize, Mami-san! The transfer student is just lucky to have such a reliable senpai in this situation!" Sayaka tells her as she leads her to where Homura is still lying in Madoka's lap.

As soon as Mami sees her soul gem, she gasps and immediately takes out the grief seed she had barely managed to obtain.

"H-How did it...?" Mami asks even as she places the grief seed flush again the almost blackened soul gem and they watch with bated breath as it slowly draws out tendrils of darkness.

Madoka shakes her head. "We don't know what happened, but I received a phone call from my dad earlier telling me that Homura-chan was missing. I tried telling you before I left, Mami-san, but there was no answer from Kyuubey and it was during class, so your phone was probably off."

"Y-yes," Mami agrees as she pulls the full grief seed away. Homura's soul gem is brighter now, not completely clean but a whole lot better than before. "Kyuubey said he had something to take care of, so the telepathic link didn't work and Miki-san just so happened to call during break and luckily I had checked my phone." She turns to the now healthier looking girl. "Akemi-san? How are you feeling?"

Homura slowly opens her eyes and Madoka is glad that empty stare is no longer there. She doesn't pull her hands away though.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura's still picking up the scattered boxes in her mind and she's still feeling the drain from her overuse of magic but...

"I'm fine... thank you."

There's a collective sigh of relief as the worse is finally over, for now.

Madoka glances at Sayaka and tilts her head in question. Sayaka nods in response.

"Mami-san?"

"Yes, Miki-san?" She has noticed their earlier exchange but lets them voice their thoughts.

"Uhm, that is...you know, how the transfer student's soul gem was all dark? She was—that is... she was turning into a witch."

They wait for the pin to drop; for Mami to process and to react.

Instead Mami sighs as she stares at nothing. "...How did you girls find out?"

Sayaka and Madoka look at her in shock and even Homura trains her eyes on her; the last time Mami had 'found out' she had tried to kill everyone. What made it different this time?

"...You knew?" is all Madoka can say. Mami had tried convincing them to become magical girls when she knew that they turned into other things as well?

Mami gives her an empty smile. "I've been a magical girl for a long time, Kaname-san. I've...seen things and have noticed things; it's easier to pretend and smile or else the despair will eat me alive. But as for knowing, I've suspected, but I didn't, or couldn't, confirm it until I asked Kyuubey last night... I'm sorry if you think it was my intention to trick you; it wasn't. Loneliness can make someone do desperate things and I apologize for trying to have you girls involved."

They're quiet as the other two realize the weight of Mami's words.

They never considered things from her perspective; that is, a girl who was ripped away from her carefree life where she suddenly was all alone and had to take on the world so that she could live. If they were in her situation, wouldn't they want someone there as well?

"I'm sorry, Mami-san," Madoka apologizes as she bows her head. "I... didn't know."

"Y-Yeah," Sayaka agrees as she also lowers her head. She had assumed that being a magical girl was amazing (before she had talked to Homura) and she had made it seem like something to be idolized when in fact it meant walking the path of isolation and eventual destruction.

"I believe we each have our own things to apologize for and I'm willing to put it all past me if you two would forgive me as well."

"O-Of course! Mami-san!" Madoka immediately looks to the blonde who gives her a real smile this time.

"Yeah! Of course!" Sayaka agrees.

Homura's cat ears twitch but she remains quiet.

/

They know that Homura is feeling better when she regards Sayaka with an almost exasperated look. "...I can't believe you broke my neighbor's window as well..."

"H-Hey! I didn't know which one was yours; it's not like there was a sign pointing out which window belongs to your apartment! Do you know how hard it was to climb that rusted ladder? I almost fell—like twice!" Sayaka argues back as she tries to defend her actions. "Plus, if it hadn't been for me you'd be all witch-y right now!"

It's the wrong thing to say and Homura visibly flinches and Mami and Madoka both give Sayaka looks of disapproval.

"Uhm," Sayaka rubs at her neck nervously. "At least everything worked out in the end... and luckily no one was home. It should be easy to fix, right? I mean, you can use your magic on it or something...?"

Homura stares at her blankly and Mami shakes her head.

"Magic can only fix things that already have magic in them," Mami explains patiently. "Our bodies are intertwined with our soul gems, which is why we can heal and rebuild...parts. Objects though—if they are made from our magic, such as our weapons, or are already enchanted by magic...then we can repair them—at least the magical part. Other objects however, are impossible to rebuild; we can only destroy."

"Uh oh... so enchanting it with magic won't work?"

Mami shakes her head. "We'd have to constantly supply magic to the window otherwise it would fall apart again."

Sayaka pales as she thinks to the two broken windows she had kicked through. "Uh... so now what?"

Homura sighs. "While it's rare, vandals do sometimes break into the buildings in this neighborhood since the area is usually so empty. I will need to talk to the manager before I leave, but I can mention that my apartment was also vandalized and that should at least help lessen the suspicion somehow. You are lucky there are no security cameras in this area, Miki Sayaka."

Sayaka decides to be the mature one and merely sticks her tongue out at Homura in response.

After Homura informs the manager of her broken window and how to reach her in case they need to file a police report (which she doubts the manager will do), Madoka leads Homura back to her house while Sayaka goes home and Mami decides to try and gain more grief seeds, just in case.

"..yes, Papa, she's okay...we're heading home now...okay, thanks Papa, see you in a bit."

Madoka locks her phone and even with her hand gripping her schoolbag, she manages to slip the device into her skirt pocket before turning to Homura who's trailing behind her and holding onto her other hand.

The closer they get to Madoka's house, the more Homura's reminded of *that* phone call and the more she doesn't want to remember.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka keeps her voice soft but knows that the other girl can hear her which is proven when Homura looks up. "...I know...something happened... and," she sighs, "I need to tell Mama and Papa why you left..." she knows that Homura doesn't want to and gives her an encouraging squeeze on the hand.

Homura doesn't reply and instead walks forward until she's right behind Madoka and the smaller girl suddenly feels a weight on her head.

Homura's leaning her forehead against Madoka and fighting to keep the tears at bay; she just cleaned her soul gem, she didn't need to do it again, not so soon.

Madoka waits, though her face slightly flushes as they're in clear view of anyone else around them but she tries her best to ignore their surroundings.

"...my mom died..."

All thoughts flee from Madoka's mind and she whirls around to gather Homura in her arms.

"W-What? H-how?" 'Why?' Madoka whispers in her mind to no one; why did so many things seem to want to prevent Homura from being happy?

Homura takes a deep breath and slowly releases it, no doubt trying to calm herself. "..It was... an accident. The funeral is next week.." A pause. "..I don't want to go..."

Madoka nods and holds her tighter. "That's okay, we'll just take this one day at a time, okay, Homura-chan?"

Homura bites back a sob. "Y-yeah," she agrees softly.

One day at a time.

/

When they arrive back home, Madoka tells Homura to go to her room while she explains the situation to her dad.

Homura pushes the door open further and is surprised to see Amy sitting on Madoka's bed. She tilts her head and looks at her in question.

"Meow."

"...I see."

"...meow."

"...not my fault," Homura says and she closes the door after her and heads over to the bed.

"Meow."

"Mm, maybe later," Homura tells her as she lowers herself onto the mattress. She's exhausted. She doesn't even have the strength to change back into her pajamas.

"Meoow."

Homura chooses not to reply and closes her eyes. She hears Amy protest and then she feels the bed move slightly as Amy jumps off and then there's the sound of something being dragged along the floor.

"Meooow."

"Nngh..." Homura cracks an eye open and peers down at Amy who's sitting in front of a familiar looking red bag.

"Meoow."

"...alright." Homura reaches down and grabs the bag, easily tearing open the plastic to reveal the snacks inside. She glances at the back: recommended only two to three snacks daily. She pulls out one snack the size of Amy's paw and holds it out to her.

"Meowww."

"Mm," Homura blinks sleepily at her. "Madoka helped pick this one out. It should be good."

Amy sniffs it curiously and then opens her mouth to take it from Homura's outstretched hand. Homura watches as Amy uses her paws to hold the treat down as she takes a small bite.

"...How is it?"

Amy ignores her and continues to eat without replying.

Homura stares at the bag in her hand blankly. She reaches inside and pulls out another snack. Just as she puts the treat to her mouth and takes a bite, the room to Madoka's door opens and she turns in response.

"..." Madoka looks at Homura and to the bag in her hands. "Homura-chan..."

Homura blushes slightly at having been caught, though she still finishes the whole piece.

/

After Madoka makes sure that Homura brushes her teeth thoroughly and she somehow manages to change clothes without Madoka's help, she sleeps the rest of the day, curled up in bed and only wakes briefly when Madoka joins her later at night.

Madoka isn't surprised though, when she wakes up to Homura tossing and turning in her sleep. She brings the other girl closer, whispering words of comfort and wiping the gathered tears from her closed eyes.

"..Madoka..." Homura's voice sounds pained and Madoka gently shushes her.

"I'm here, Homura-chan, it's okay."

She whimpers softly and buries her head into the crook of Madoka's neck.

"Shhh, Homura-chan. It's okay."

Eventually her cries quiet down and she falls back into a less disturbed sleep. Madoka watches her for a while longer before she too closes her eyes and sleep**s.**

AN: Another day, another chapter. Had a bit of a problem with this one too.

As always, thanks for the reviews :))) especially to metalon and Passerby-A. Seriously your reviews are well thought out and they manage to give me some feedback on what I'm writing. Not that the other reviews aren't appreciated but sometimes it's good to hear what others are thinking other than "this is a good story" or "this is interesting." Is it really?!
?_? The story is progressing quite slow and after this the chapters will be a bit shorter...

Regardless, thanks for reading. plot holes~ plot holes~

Chapter 10: holding on

It takes her five minutes to locate her phone (somehow it had tumbled under Madoka's bed) and when she powers it on, she's relieved to find that it still works. She has vague memories of her crushing it in her hands but that had to be an allusion to a different time because there are no visible signs of damage on her phone.

Why it was off though, remains a mystery and as she double checks to see if it's still functioning and dismisses the missed calls from yesterday, her eyes catch sight of the date and she pauses as she tries to remember the significance of today.

She absently takes in the time—and is surprised that almost ten minutes has passed since she had entered Madoka's room to search for her phone.

As if on cue, there's a knock on the door and Madoka peers inside.

"Homura-chan? Breakfast is ready...?"

"Ah. Yes, I will be right there," she tells her as she closes her phone and slips it into her skirt pocket.

"Homura-chan?"

She looks up to see Madoka staring at her, face worried and eyes searching for—*something*.

"Yes, Madoka?" Homura straightens, adopting her usual aloof appearance and it does nothing to reassure the smaller girl.

"A-Are you sure you want to go to school today? Maybe it would be better to stay home and rest..."

And subject herself to being watched like a hawk by Tomohisa?

Homura shakes her head. "I am feeling a lot better today, Madoka." Pause. "...Stable."

They both fall in silence as their thoughts refer to yesterday—and then Amy is meowing at them in irritation.

Homura brushes her hair behind her. "...You sleep too much anyways, Amy. She is right though, Madoka. Let's not keep your parents waiting."

Madoka watches as Homura exits the room and after a small smile to the already sleeping cat on her desk, Madoka follows the other girl out the door.

As they dig into breakfast, the normally cheerful atmosphere is muted as they try to avoid anything that might end up setting Homura off. Even Takkun senses something and for once eats his breakfast quietly, eyes squinting around the table as he tries to figure out what's wrong.

Homura reaches for her glass of milk and misses it when she finally remembers.

"Ah." She suddenly pulls out her phone to confirm her fears and puts a hand to her forehead. She must really be out of it in this timeline; it's the first time she has ever forgotten about this day, ever.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka is worried and when Homura glances up, she can see everyone (minus Takkun who's enjoying his tomatoes) staring at her in question.

"Ah—" her reply is cut off by the generic sound of her ringtone and she glances down—this time making sure to check the number and it's someone she recognizes, "—sorry," she bows in apology and stands up while flipping her phone open. "Hello?" she asks as she moves towards the hallway for more privacy.

Madoka exchanges worried looks with her parents but they can only sit and wait until Homura is done and turn back to their breakfasts.

"...yes... sorry...no—right...sorry..."

They can hear bits and pieces of her one-sided conversation and Madoka fidgets impatiently as she waits for Homura to rejoin them.

"...alright...n-no...o-okay...I-I know...o-okay...see you soon... y-yes. Okay...bye..." The phone snaps shut and Homura sighs before slipping the device back into her skirt pocket and walks back to the dining room table.

"Sorry, I had to take the call during breakfast," Homura apologizes but she doesn't retake her seat. "Uhm.."

"Is everything alright, Homura?" Junko asks as she looks at her calmly.

"Y-Yes," Homura nods. "Well, actually, I need to leave now, I'm sorry."

Madoka stares at her with her fork in hand before she stands up in protest.

"What! Homura-chan! Even after everything we told you—"

"Madoka," her mother's calm voice stops her rant and Madoka sits back down as her mother turns to Homura, eyes looking serious enough that Homura steps back involuntarily. "And, can you give me one good reason why you need to leave?"

Homura flinches and her eyes nervously dart back and forth from Junko to Madoka. "U-uhm... I forgot about my doctor's appointment... so I need to leave...so I can get there before ...830...?"

Junko immediately relaxes while Madoka almost collapses against her chair.

"Homura-chan!" Madoka can't decide whether she wants to sigh in relief or laugh at Homura's awkwardness. "You couldn't have phrased it differently...?"

"Uhm," she ducks her head. "Sorry...?"

\\

It's ten minutes until lunch when Homura enters the classroom and all the sleepy and hungry students watch as she closes the door and approaches the teacher, note in hand.

The middle-aged science teacher with a permanent frown on his face accepts the paper, eyes scrutinizing the written words and then he reluctantly waves her off in dismissal and she bows slightly before walking over to her seat.

Madoka gives her a small wave and Homura returns a nod before she turns around and sits down.

Homura only has around two lines of notes when the bell chimes, signaling the start of lunch and she puts her things away before walking to Madoka's desk.

"How was your appointment, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks as she pulls out both their lunches; she had insisted on carrying Homura's today and Homura reaches for hers with a murmur of thanks just as an arm ropes around her shoulders and she jumps in surprise.

"Heyyy, there you are, transfer student," Sayaka says with a grin. "Listen, Madoka, Hitomi, you two go up and meet Mami-san first, I need to borrow this little kitty cat for a few minutes."

Before Homura can respond, Sayaka is pulling her away and dragging the dark-haired girl through the hallways.

Madoka merely stacks her own bentou on top of Homura's and stands up even though she's worried. "Shall we go, Hitomi-chan?"

"'Little kitty cat?'" Hitomi asks as she follows after Madoka. There's a strange tone to her voice and a weird look on face.

"Ehehe," Madoka gives her a nervous smile. "U-Uhm, yeah, you know, Homura-chan.. kind of has this cat-like vibe...?"

Hitomi thinks and then she's nodding in agreement. "Ah, I understand what you mean, Madoka-san. Akemi-san would certainly be a black cat."

Here Madoka gives her a real smile. "Yeah! She would, wouldn't she!"

/

Sayaka doesn't bother removing her arm from Homura's shoulders and expertly leads her through the hallways. She continues pushing her outside to one of the buildings further in the back where there are less people and less curious eyes.

Once they're in a quiet area where they can talk in peace, Sayaka finally releases her hold and the now annoyed girl smooths out her uniform before turning to Sayaka with a frown.

"That was rather unnecessary, Miki Sayaka," Homura tells her as she brushes her hair back.

Sayaka shrugs. "Just had to make sure you would follow me, that's all."

They stare at each other, Homura with her usual blank face and Sayaka looking nervous. Even with, or maybe because of what happened yesterday, the two are still awkward around each other and Sayaka sighs. She might as well get this over with.

"Alright," Sayaka clears her throat. "Since you were kind of busy yesterday," Homura looks away, "I didn't get a chance to talk to you. But, well..." Sayaka lowers her voice, "do you remember what me and Madoka were talking about yesterday...? You were kind of there, but kind of not..."

Homura looks back to her and hesitantly shakes her head. "No, I'm afraid I don't have much recollection of what happened while I was... indisposed..." she gestures and Sayaka understands. "I remember arriving to my apartment, but everything after that is a blur."

Which means that she was really, really far gone.

"Right, right," Sayaka says nervously as she rubs at her neck. Why is this so hard to do? If she couldn't even tell people about it, how could she even do the actual confession? "Anyways... I'm...I'm going to con...fess... to... Kyousuke... today."

"...I see." Homura thinks for a moment. "Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

Sayaka looks at her in frustration. "Hey!" she growls. "It might not be a big deal to you—but it's a pretty big deal to me!"

Homura nods. "Yes, I have heard that confessing is one of those defining moments in a young girl's life," she tilts her head curiously, "but, I don't understand why you're telling me this...?"

Sayaka sighs again. This girl really is hard to deal with. "I kind of remember you making a really big deal about me wasting my wish on Kyousuke and though it pains to admit it, the things you said... were maybe sort of, kind of... just a liiitttle bit true."

"Just a little," Homura repeats and Sayaka rolls her eyes.

"Yes, just a little. But!" She points to Homura. "I'm going to show you that you're wrong! I am going to help him, whether or not he accepts my feelings! I wasn't lying when I said that I want people to be able to hear him play again!"

Homura barely bites back a long suffering sigh. What was the point of lecturing her about witches and soul gems if she was going to make a wish anyways?

Is Miki Sayaka more of a fool than she thought?

"Are you sure that is wise, Miki Sayaka?" Homura tells her. "Accepting the life of a magical girl also means accepting that your soul is no longer inside your body; whether that still makes us human can be debatable. If Kamijou Kyousuke were to accept your feelings, will you be able to be with him while knowing that you are merely a living shell? A zombie, as someone so eloquently put once."

We'refreakingzombies—

Here, Sayaka falters. It's true, the idea that her soul, the embodiment of what it means to be alive, would be trapped and separated from her body and that is the most disturbing thing for her, even more so than becoming a witch, which is a strange thought. But...

"You know, it's funny, because I mean, it does bother me. It bothers me a lot actually. But then I look at Mami-san and there's no way I can even question that she's not human," Sayaka locks eyes with Homura. "Maybe being human means what's here," she thumps a fist to her heart, "more than something that you can't even really see. Plus, what about you?"

"... What about me?"

"I mean," Sayaka gestures to Homura, "you're more cat than human now, aren't you? And Madoka doesn't seem to mind at all."

Blink. "...I do not understand."

Sayaka sighs and crosses her arms across her chest. "Well, that's something you two need to figure out on your own. But, I think I'm okay with my soul being somewhere else; as long as I don't forget what it means to really 'be human' there's no way that I can be anything less. And," there's an uncertainty in her eyes as she gazes down to the floor. "How would I be able to call myself human if I didn't help Kyousuke...? How

would I even be able to face him again?" she closes her eyes. "Ever since the accident, all I could think about was 'why wasn't it me instead?' He has something—a talent that shouldn't be restrained just because of a stupid accident! And I can help him for once! More than buying stupid CDs or giving him words of comfort—I can actually do something and help him!"

Homura frowns. "That way of thinking will be your downfall, Miki Sayaka. You do not owe Kamijou Kyousuke anything; it is regrettable that he suffered injuries that will hinder his future but—"

Sayaka holds out her hand. "Look, I get what you're saying. I know—alright?! *I know*, but as long as Kyousuke's in that bed and I'm out here..."

Homura shakes her head at her stubbornness. She tries a different approach.

"And if Kamijou Kyousuke does not accept your feelings?" Homura asks instead. "Will you be able to handle the rejection? Will you be able to separate your wish of merely wanting to help him because you want to help him opposed to wanting to help him to gain his favor? You were there yesterday, Miki Sayaka," Homura reminds her. "It's not easy, trying to hang on." She would know. "I wonder if you really can handle the darkness you carry in your heart."

Sayaka smirks at her. "Don't act all high and mighty now, transfer student. Why don't you worry about yourself first before worrying about others?" It's not what she means to say at all and there's a surge of guilt when she sees Homura's jaw clench and her hands tighten into fists.

Homura remains quiet, trying to calm her emotions and Sayaka looks away guiltily.

"Sorry, that's... uh... yeah," Sayaka awkwardly rubs at her neck. It really was a cheap shot.

"It's fine," Homura closes her eyes and turns around. "It'll be useless to try and convince you—but remember what you're getting into, Miki Sayaka. There is only one ending for all magical girls," and with a flick of her wrist, Homura is walking away from her with her dark hair trailing behind.

Sayaka can only feel slight amusement at Homura's penchant for dramatics.

She sobers up though, when she remembers she has one more person she needs to tell about her confession.

/

When Sayaka arrives on the roof after retrieving her bentou she had left in the classroom, she's surprised when she finds that Homura is not with the others as she joins them.

"Sayaka-chan? Where's Homura-chan?" The smile immediately drops from Madoka's face; she knows how Sayaka is and how surprisingly sensitive Homura is and fears that something had happened.

"Uhm...no idea, she left first and I went to get my lunch," she holds up her bentou in explanation.

Madoka frowns and is about to stand when Homura appears by the entrance to the roof. Relief floods her face even as she notices the numerous amount of milk boxes in the girl's arms; the pile looks especially larger today for some reason...

Sayaka waits until Homura approaches, promptly distracting Madoka and Mami before she turns to Hitomi.

"Hey, Hitomi..." the other girl looks up from her bentou to regard Sayaka curiously.

Sayaka takes a moment to really look at friend. Beautiful, with a great figure and a rich background. Multi-talented and tall and someone that constantly receives love letters from random boys (and girls) throughout the school. Popular.

From what she has gathered from broken memories, Hitomi has to be the close friend that also likes Kyousuke; Madoka is clearly too enamored with a certain cat-eared girl to pay attention to anyone else.

"What's wrong, Sayaka-san?" Hitomi looks at her as she places her bentou down in worry.

"Ahhh...I just," she glances around to make sure that no one else is paying attention to her and then steps closer and whispers something in Hitomi's ear.

There's a gasp of surprise from Hitomi and when Sayaka moves back to judge her reaction, she's shocked to see there's a smile on Hitomi's face.

"I see," Hitomi looks almost proud of her. "I wish you the best of luck, Sayaka-san."

"Y-Yeah," Sayaka stammers out. Hitomi is cheering her on? Is that how it usually went? She glances to Homura as if trying to ask her, but the other girl is busy working her way through another box of strawberry milk as Madoka scolds her and Sayaka merely takes a seat and opens her own bentou.

/

If Sayaka is nervous throughout the school day, she's even more so by the time the bell chimes signaling that classes are over. It doesn't help that Madoka keeps giving her worried looks while Mami always seems on the verge of saying something and Hitomi uncharacteristically squeezes her hand before she leaves to attend her...what was it today? Traditional dance class?

In fact, the only thing that keeps her grounded is Homura who's acting the same as always: blase, blank, passive. It reminds Sayaka that she also has something to prove to Homura as well and she straightens up, wiping sweaty hands on her skirt.

"A-Alright, I'm going."

"W-Wait, Sayaka-chan, maybe—"

Sayaka turns to Madoka and gives her a smile. "I'll be fine, Madoka, Mami-san. Don't follow me, please, it'll be really embarrassing if..."

They can only respect her decision and without another glance, she walks down the path to her destiny.

Madoka watches after her best friend and can't shake the bad feeling she gets when she finally notices Kyuubey following after Sayaka.

/

Something that Homura is finding increasingly annoying in this timeline is that everyone around her seems to treat her like she's as fragile as glass (though she figures that the last few days have been proving just how broken she already is).

But still, she has many, many things to do which includes restocking grief seeds due to her continuous lapses of judgement and though she had wanted to join Mami on her patrol, she's once again dragged away by Madoka and is unable to refuse because it's Madoka.

As if sensing her thoughts, Madoka turns to her and smiles. "I know you want to go, Homura-chan, but please, just rest for one more day?"

And that is the end of that.

So Homura and Madoka return home just as Tomohisa pulls a fresh pie from the oven and they all enjoy a snack as Madoka tells her dad about her day. Somehow or other, it turns into a trip to the park and everything is so normal and mundane that Homura just feels so lost as she stands to the side and watches as the three Kanames throw a ball around.

Madoka shows off her dreadful catching skills and they watch as the ball misses her outstretched hands, bounces once on the floor before lobbing back up and hitting her on the face.

"Ouch!" Madoka falls back onto the soft grass and rubs at her nose.

"Madoka! Are you alright?" Tomohisa rushes over to his daughter and she sheepishly rubs the back of her head.

"Ehehe, oops," she smiles at her dad who checks for bumps and bruises.

"Maroka!" Takkun yells and he tackles her and they both tumble onto the grass again. "Are you okay, Maroka?"

Madoka grins at her little brother. "Takkun!" And then she starts tickling him. His high pitched giggles fill the air as he struggles away from his sister and Tomohisa smiles at his two children.

Homura turns away; she doesn't belong here. She should be out there, destroying the things that want to take this away.

As she's distracted by her thoughts, she doesn't notice as Madoka whispers something to Takkun and they both stand to sneak up on Homura.

"Kitty!" Takkun screams as he crashes head first into Homura's legs.

"Eep!" She lets out a squeak of surprise and barely manages to keep her ears from appearing just as Madoka joins in and the three fall to the ground.

"Ehehe!" Both Takkun and Madoka's laughs echo in her ears and Homura can only blink as she lays on the ground in the pile of tangled limbs.

"You're supposed to be playing, Homura-chan!" Madoka tells her as she sits up and holds her hands out. Homura stares but suddenly Takkun is giggling and then Madoka is reaching out and her hands and fingers are on Homura's body, trying to figure out if the girl is ticklish or not.

Turns out, she is.

"M-Madoka!" Homura tries to escape from the unrelenting attacks as Madoka's grin grows and Takkun giggles louder. "S-stop!" her protests are ignored as Madoka continues until Homura suddenly grabs her wrists, the movement throwing Madoka off balance and she ends up falling on top of Homura.

"Eek!" this time it's Madoka who lets out a squeak as her face is unexpectedly on Homura's chest.

Homura blushes at the contact and immediately lets go and Madoka scrambles off her.

"S-Sorry," Madoka apologizes with a flushed face and Homura shakes her head.

"N-No, it was my fault... s-sorry."

"Ehehe!" Takkun laughs at the two girls and then turns to his dad. "Papa!" he calls to his dad who had seen everything.

Tomohisa smiles at them. "What is it, Takkun?" he says as he lets Madoka and Homura recover from their embarrassment.

"Let's play!" he tells him as he starts running over to the earlier abandoned ball.

"Sure, Takkun."

/

When Madoka glances at her phone for the tenth time in the last two minutes, Homura resists the urge to grab the thing and throw it outside; it's obvious that Madoka is waiting for Sayaka to contact her but she still has yet to receive a phone call or text and it's driving both of them crazy but for different reasons.

A glance at her phone again and Homura can't help the sigh that escapes from her mouth.

Madoka looks at her with a small smile. "I'm sorry, I-I'm just worried about Sayaka-chan..."

Homura places her pencil down knowing that Madoka is definitely not concentrating on homework at this point.

"I mean, I wonder... how it went..." the smaller girl fidgets nervously as she barely manages to stop her eyes from zeroing in on her phone once more.

Homura thinks briefly. "Do you think Kamijou Kyousuke will return her feelings?"

Madoka's eyes widen at the question. "Kamijou-kun...? And Sayaka-chan...?" Her voice trails off as she thinks about it. Homura's only really slightly curious, but it at least stops Madoka from staring at her phone, if only for a few moments. "I-I don't know really," Madoka finally answers. "I'm not as close to Kamijou-kun as Sayaka-chan is...so it's kind of hard to say..."

Homura nods; Madoka had most likely never gotten that close to Kyousuke due to Sayaka's personal feelings.

Suddenly, Homura feels something buzzing through the air and she quickly clamps her hands on top of her head as her ears pop out.

Madoka blinks and then her face pales as she looks to Homura in fear. Homura shakes her head as she tries to hide her ears but there's too much magical energy in the air.

"Kitty!" Takkun yells out as he catches sight of the black tail behind Homura and she quickly tries to hide it but the action leaves her ears exposed.

Madoka gasps when she hears the door opening and her mom's voice and she roughly grabs Homura and pulls her down so that her face is in Madoka's lap and is hidden from plain view.

"M-Madoka!?"

"Kitty!"

"I'm home!"

Homura freezes when she notices Junko's voice and Madoka hurriedly places her hands on top of Homura's ears.

"P-Put them away, Homura-chan!" she whispers frantically and Homura squeezes her eyes shut as she tries to fight past the magic that's still thrumming through the air.

"Ahh," Junko blinks when she sees Madoka looking suspicious and hiding something under the table. "Madoka?" She's about to ask where Homura is when Takkun tackles her.

"Mama!" Takkun holds out a piece of paper to her. "Maroka drew this!"

"Oh did she?" Junko asks as she bends down to examine the drawing; it's a picture of the five of them, including Homura walking through the park. Like everything her daughter did, it was cute. "Very cute, Takkun!"

"Yeah!" Takkun nods.

"H-Homura-chan," Madoka keeps her voice low. "A-Are you done yet?" Madoka glances down, moving her hands away hesitantly and immediately moves them back when she sees the ears are still there.

"Madoka? Where's Homura?" Junko asks as she steps closer to see what Madoka is hiding.

"Ahhh? H-Homura-chan? U-Uhm... Homura-chan is..." Madoka tries her best to not look down but her eyes are drawn to the girl in her lap and Junko raises an eyebrow.

Suddenly, Homura sits back up. "S-Surprise..."

Junko blinks at Homura's lukewarm delivery and scratches her head as Takkun giggles. "It should be more...exciting than that, Homura," Junko merely tells her as she shakes her head. "Plus, you were giving everything away, Madoka."

"Ehehe," Madoka scratches her cheek and Homura merely seems embarrassed.

"Next time, you should hide in the hallway or something, and when someone walks by, your voice should be louder so that you can really scare them, Homura!"

"O-Okay," Homura nods at the advice.

Junko ruffles Takkun's hair and then straightens up. "Mama's going to change into something more comfortable and then you can show me what else you drew today, Takkun!"

"Okay, Mama!" the little boy agrees before he parks himself in front of the screen again with his favourite cartoon playing.

Madoka quickly grabs her notebook and scribbles something on it, gesturing to Homura.

'Is it a witch? What happened?'

Homura shakes her head and grabs her pencil to jot down her answer under Madoka's.

'No, it was a different reaction. Miki Sayaka made her wish.'

Madoka rereads the sentence and then stares at Homura before reaching for her phone; no new messages.

Why didn't Sayaka contact her...?

\\

She's weightless—or at least that's what it feels like when she weaves through all the little random familiars that stand in between her and the witch. She pulls back and slashes at a few that are in her range as she continues to run closer and closer and then she's leaping, high, higher than ever and there's a vague sense of pain as something grazes her shoulder but she ignores it and then it's gone.

Faster and closer and then she's concentrating on her sword, stretching, extending the blade until its twice the size as her and then she's running, running straight through the witch, in and then out.

Done and gone.

So why did everything still feel so dark and why was something gripping her heart so tightly?

Why did everything hurt so badly?

The witch's barrier slowly disappears around her but she merely collapses onto her knees as her own transformation fades away.

She should be happy—but for some reason all she wants to do is cry.

"Miki-san," a calm voice breaks through her daze and she glances up, surprised to see Mami peering over her.

"M-Mami-san...?" Sayaka is confused as the older girl helps her to her feet.

"Do you have any grief seeds?" Mami merely asks and Sayaka gives a small nod before pulling one out of her pocket. "Please use it, Miki-san."

Sayaka stares at the grey object in her hands blankly.

"Miki-san."

It's the tone of Mami's voice that sends her moving and she summons her soul gem into her hand and then gentle fingers are pressing the seed next to the blue jewel and she watches as it absorbs the swirling darkness. Suddenly her mind is clear and she can think again.

"Are you feeling better now?" Mami asks her as she takes the used grief and stores it away in her pocket.

"Y-Yeah," Sayaka nods and this time she looks embarrassed at having Mami bear witness to her moment of weakness. "W-What are you doing here?" she asks instead.

Mami looks around and then tilts her head, gesturing for Sayaka to follow her, and they both start a slow walk to somewhere else. "I received a message from Kaname-san,

though I suppose it's better to say Akemi-san told Kaname-san to send me a message." She smiles at Sayaka as she continues to lead them through the barely lit streets. "She told me you might need help and to 'follow the path of destruction' and that I would find you at the end of it. I wasn't quite sure what she meant until I noticed that some familiars I was planning on dealing with today disappeared."

Sayaka rolls her eyes; figures that the transfer student was keeping an eye on her.

An expert of the streets in Mitakihara, Mami leads Sayaka through a darkened alleyway that makes the other girl nervous, but the path opens up and they find themselves in front of one of the smaller shopping districts.

"Please take a seat, Miki-san," Mami nods over to one of the public benches that has obviously seen better days. "Will hot tea be alright with you?"

"Uh... y-yeah," Sayaka agrees and Mami gestures once more to the bench before heading over the vending machine nearby.

Sayaka follows as directed and after making sure the strange stain in the bench is permanent and won't ruin her skirt, she takes a hesitant seat as she waits for Mami to return.

The area around them is quiet and it's the first time that Sayaka realizes that although she has lived in Mitakihara all her life, she really knows nothing about these little pockets that exist outside of her usual path.

It distracts her for a moment, but then her thoughts draw back to this afternoon and her heart clenches and something passes over her eyes but suddenly there's a steaming hot cup of tea held out in front of her.

"Here you go, Miki-san. The selection here is smaller than I had hoped; I hope Oolong will be alright?"

"A-ah...y-yeah, t-that's fine..." Sayaka takes the tea and when her hands wrap around the cup, she realizes how cold she really is and brings it closer to her body for warmth.

Mami merely takes a seat next to her and they both sip their drinks in companionable silence; Mami, waiting for Sayaka to collect her thoughts while Sayaka dreads the inevitable that is bound to be asked.

Halfway done with her tea and Mami sighs softly when Sayaka continues to remain silent. She is the older one here and she supposes she will be the one to rip the band aid off.

"I take it that your confession didn't go quite as planned?" Mami asks as Sayaka cringes in response.

"...Y-yeah...kind of..."

"...sometimes it's better to talk about things than to hold it all in."

Sayaka tightens her grip on her cup and the paper crinkles slightly. She wants to yell at Mami; yell at Homura. Yell at the world. In a bout of frustration, she grabs her tea and throws it straight across street. They watch as the liquid spills from the cup, creating an arch of tea before spilling onto the floor. There's a light hollow sound as the paper cup bounces off the cement before rolling in a circle and coming to a stop after another half rotation.

"Miki-san..."

Sayaka laughs suddenly though her laughter quickly turns to sobs as she retakes her seat and places her face in her hands.

"...I couldn't tell him," she whispers but then there's another bitter laugh. "After all that bravado... I couldn't even tell him!"

Mami is quiet and merely pulls out an unused grief seed. "Miki-san, show me your soul gem."

Sayaka feels sudden anger and struggles to keep from blowing up at the other girl.

"Miki-san."

Sayaka clenches her hands into fists but she obediently holds out her left hand and re-summons her darkening soul gem. Mami doesn't say a word and merely fills the new grief seed and pockets it once more when Sayaka's soul gem is clean again.

They're quiet as Sayaka keeps her soul gem out instead of returning it to its ring form.

Mami glances up at the night sky before turning back to Sayaka.

"Miki-san, I'm sorry; someone should've been there to support you..."

Sayaka is silent and sighs softly. "...No, like I told you earlier, I wanted to do it on my own, especially if he ended up rejecting me... and I was really determined to tell him, you know? But today... he found out he could never play again. He ... he told me that he's *useless*, that he has no purpose in life... that he wished he had died instead of suffering like this... I couldn't... not after all that..."

They're quiet and Mami stares up to the endless sky.

"...Are you giving up?"

Sayaka turns to her in confusion.

"Your confession to him... you can still tell him."

She shakes her head. "No... I can't... not anymore..."

Hands are on her shoulder and she finds herself staring into fierce golden eyes. "Miki-san! You cannot give up so easily! As you are now, your regrets and feelings are poison to you; the more you hold off telling Kamijou-kun how you feel, the more it'll hurt you in the end. You *need* to tell him."

Sayaka closes her eyes. "...I'm scared, Mami-san."

"You are strong, Miki-san. And we will be here—your friends will be here to support you and help you get through this."

"Mami-san...what if...what if..." Sayaka swallows heavily. "...What if I find out that I really made my wish so that he would fall in love with me...?"

Sayaka opens her eyes to see those warm eyes still on her.

"Did you?"

"...I don't know..." she whispers. "I want to save him, but I also want..."

"...Then we figure out how you really feel and take it one day at a time."

Sayaka bows her head. Like Homura has told her, she's a fool.

"...I don't want to die, Mami-san..."

"You will not die, Miki-san!"

"...But I couldn't... I had to save Kyousuke, you know? I had no choice..."

Fingers dig into her shoulders and the pain breaks through Sayaka's haze.

"Listen to me, Miki-san. You will live. You will not turn into a witch. You will tell Kamijou-kun that you love him. You will survive this—or else I will kill you myself."

Sayaka's eyes widen and finds those golden eyes are no longer friendly and warm.

"M-Mami-san...?"

"Magical girls are not martyrs," Mami tells her vehemently. "We are not sacrifices to the universe; we are protectors of those who cannot defend themselves. We only turn into witches if we give up, and *you are not giving up,"* fingers tighten in emphasis and Sayaka winces in pain. "Repeat after me, Miki-san. 'I am not giving up.'"

Sayaka can only stare and sharp fingernails can be felt through the fabric of her uniform. "...I am not giving up," she repeats.

"'I will not turn into a witch.'"

"I will not turn into a witch."

"'I will confess to Kyousuke.'"

"I will confess to Kyousuke."

The pressure on her shoulders is lifted and Mami gives her her usual smile. "See? Now that wasn't too bad, was it?"

Sayaka nods numbly. "Y-Yes, Mami-san..."

\\

"..Homura-chan?"

It is close to 11:30pm now and the two of them are in bed after receiving the news from Mami 30 minutes ago that Sayaka is doing fine and that they shouldn't worry about her, at least for now.

"Mm..?" Madoka can hear the sleepiness in Homura's voice and feels guilty for waking her up. There's a shift of the blankets and through the bright moonlight, Madoka can see a head of dark hair poking out from under the blankets as Homura draws herself up to look at the other girl. "What's wrong, Madoka?"

"Ah... I'm sorry, were you falling asleep?"

"It's fine, what's wrong?" Homura sounds more awake now, obviously worried about Madoka.

"Mm, nothing—just..." she sighs. She knows that Homura is waiting for a reply and she voices her thoughts. "Kamijou-kun probably turned Sayaka-chan down, huh?"

Contact from Sayaka had been brief but Homura can already assume...

"...Yes."

Knowing how much Sayaka liked Kyousuke made Madoka's heart hurt for her best friend and she wonders how she can comfort her.

"...Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"...H-have you ever been in love?" Maybe if she could understand it better, she'd be able to offer better advice to Sayaka rather than a 'he just doesn't know what he's missing' or a 'don't worry, Sayaka-chan!'

Homura remains quiet long enough that Madoka wonders if she has fallen back to sleep. She turns and finds lavender eyes staring at her.

"...Homura-chan?" For some reason, her heart skips a beat.

Eyes glance away and Homura shifts until she's staring at the ceiling above.

"... I can't say if what I felt was really love," Homura states as her eyes gaze beyond the ceiling and into the past. "..but there was someone I really looked up to, a long, long time ago."

Madoka turns and searches for Homura's hand under the blankets, squeezing it once she finds it.

"W-What happened? I mean—are you—do you—" Madoka can't help the little bit of jealousy bubbling in her chest.

She's surprised when Homura turns to look at her with a rare smile and brings Madoka's hand close to her face, holding it gently against her cheek.

"Things happened, but I hope to one day thank her for everything she has done for me."

Something grips at her heart. "H-Homura-chan...?"

"We should sleep, Madoka," is all Homura says before she lets go of her hand and Madoka immediately misses the warmth. "Goodnight, Madoka."

"...goodnight, Homura-chan."

The bed shifts and Homura burrows further into the blankets while Madoka remains awake as she stares into the ceiling, searching for answers to her unanswered questions. Eventually her eyes close and she succumbs to sleep.

/

When Homura wakes later with the memory of gunshots echoing in her mind, she's barely choking back a sob as she finds warm hands circling around her.

"Shh, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers softly.

"K-Kaname-san...?" her voice is small and unsure and Madoka holds her tighter.

"It's okay, Homura-chan. I'm here," she reassures her.

"I-I'm sorry..."

"You're okay, Homura-chan. You're okay."

"I-I'm sorry, K-Kaname-san..." she sobs. "I-I didn't—I c-couldn't... I'm s-sorry..."

"I forgive you, Homura-chan. You tried your best, I know you did, so everything's okay. You're oka**y."**

AN: Ah, first off, thanks everyone for reading/reviewing! The influx of reviews by people makes me happy :) and I did say the chapters would be shorter. I forgot my numbering is off in the document manager, so starting from the next chapter onwards, **those** will be shorter. And if things in this chapter didn't make sense, I think it's because I don't know what I'm writing anymore. oops.

First, to address Passerby-A: it was more of a critique than a flame, though you did seem angry at my treatment of Homura and suddenly killing off her mom randomly but... timelines are random. What if the fact that Homura contacted her mom, was the cause of the accident? Set off a chain of unseen circumstances... really, with these AUs, anything is possible. Or maybe I just wanted to show the readers how close to the edge Homura is. I don't know. Being a magical girl is suffering.

As for Madoka's role... I'm not sure what you want her to do. What can she do? She can't really do anything; she can't make a contract. She can't be a magical girl. She can only really be support ;(I don't know what else she can be. (Maybe she will do something later)

And the awkward grammar is entirely my fault. As in, this is how I write and even when I re-read (which I do, I assure you) it looks correct to me. Awkward, maybe, but still understandable. You can point out the mistakes if you'd like...

Another person also mentioned that Sayaka wouldn't contract because she knows the truth about turning into a witch. I... disagree. She knows about wishes now and has a way to actually help Kyousuke. It's the first thing she thinks of really, when she's trying to decide what to wish for (her talking about wishing for riches or whatever doesn't count). After knowing this, and having to face Kyousuke everyday and seeing the way that he struggles through rehabilitation and his depression, I don't think she'd be able to handle the guilt of knowing she can save him and not doing so, despite the consequences. If that still doesn't sound believable, then I think I might not have an understanding of her character (which I admit, I really don't...) Regardless, in this story Sayaka still becomes a magical girl. I was originally going to have her confess to Kyousuke and then be rejected, but then this happened and there's the answer to Mami's 'stability' at knowing the truth. That... is an unexpected development as well.

What this means is that I need to change many things of what I've already written in future chapters... *Hiatus forever and starts a different story instead*

Chapter 11: reunion

"Heh, never thought I'd show my face around here again," a figure comments as she takes another bite from the stick of pocky hanging off her mouth. "So, what seems to be the problem, Kyuubey? You told me that something happened between you and Mami and now she's shut you out."

/Yes, Sakura Kyouko, that is correct. I'm afraid Mami is being influenced by another magical girl that has settled into Mitakihara. Akemi Homura. She's an irregular and continues to meddle with the balance of things in this region/

"Really? What'd she do?" Kyouko is curious as she finishes the one stick and pulls more pocky from her jacket pocket.

/Not only has she continuously interrupted my task in recruiting potential magical girls, but due to her interference, I am no longer able to collect spent grief seeds. As you know, used grief seeds are in danger of re-hatching into witches. I suspect she's planning on doing something with the grief seeds, perhaps a mass release of witches into the city once she has enough and she's dragging other girls into her schemes/

Kyouko draws in a sharp breath. "What? What kind of messed up girl is this?"

/I'm afraid anyone who interacts with her is corrupted by her magic that differs from normal. After contact with her, Mami is no longer talking to me and is also no longer depositing grief seeds to me. The most recent contracted girl is following in her footsteps as well/

Kyouko whistles softly. If straight-laced Mami is doing something like this then something definitely had to be wrong. She pauses. "What do you mean her magic is different?"

/She has physical manifestations of her powers on her body and though there's evidence to suggest that I was the one to make a contract with her, I have no recollection of doing such a thing. Her magic may come from an unknown source/

"Hmmm, interesting." She smirks into the night sky but her eyes glint dangerously. "So what you're saying is this Akemi girl is making a mockery of magical girls and needs to be taught a lesson. Heh. Sounds like fun."

/

There's something too saccharine about Sayaka as they walk to school the next morning and when she lets out another forced laugh, Madoka decides to step in and grabs her by the wrist.

"Sayaka-chan, please—"

Sayaka pulls her arm away, effectively cutting her off. She keeps her back to Madoka and stares straight ahead.

"Madoka. This is the only way I know how to deal—so," she turns and gives her a sad smile, "let me just pretend to be alright, okay? I'll be fine."

Madoka can only helplessly watch as Sayaka continues to walk ahead, intent on pretending like yesterday never happened. Hitomi looks conflicted but eventually she too lowers her head.

"We should go as well, Madoka-san," Hitomi tells her softly.

"...Okay, Hitomi-chan," she agrees and glances behind her to where Homura is following after them ever so diligently. The dark-haired girl notices her gaze and tilts her head in question. Madoka gives her a small smile and shakes her head before turning back around to join Hitomi as they move to catch up to Sayaka.

"Hurry up you slow pokes!" Sayaka shouts at them, seemingly like her usual self. The smile on her face however, and the movements of her waving arms are exaggerated; a lie.

It makes Madoka's heart hurt, to know yet unable to do anything.

\

Even though Sayaka makes faces at her when she catches Madoka staring, it's not the same.

Madoka's starting to realize that nothing will ever be the same.

Quiet classes and their dropped telepathic conversations can attest to this. Now that they have realized Kyuubey's true intentions, all of them have stopped associating with him. None of them want to deal with his misleading truths and his non lies by omissions. As the only non magical girl, Madoka can only talk to the others telepathically through him and they have decided that they won't bother with that anymore. They aren't sure what he'll do with the things he may overhear; if he'll try and twist their words somehow and do *something*.

Better safe than sorry.

They have also decided to stop giving him used grief seeds, effectively cutting off the need to see him again, ever. Instead, they're now storing them in these little tin containers that Homura seems to have an unlimited supply of and those are then hidden in her magical shield, disappearing into magical space, never to be seen again.

A lot of things have definitely changed within the past few days and as Madoka doodles in her notebook, she thinks back to yesterday and can't help but wonder what had really happened during Sayaka's confession. What had been Kyousuke's reason for turning her down... or if something else had happened somehow...

There's a lot of things that Madoka wants to ask and she resolves to find answers so that she can help Sayaka.

When the lunch bell finally chimes, she immediately puts her things away and turns to her childhood friend.

"I'm starving!" Sayaka tells her with a grin.

Madoka nods and though she is full of nervous energy, she decides to wait until they're in a more private setting to voice her thoughts.

Up on the roof, Sayaka is still smiling but still not all the way there and Homura wonders if she'll need to use a grief seed before school ends.

When there's a lull in conversation, Madoka looks to Sayaka with determination in her eyes.

"Sayaka-chan—"

"Hey, Hitomi?" Sayaka turns to Hitomi who blinks in surprise at being addressed so suddenly.

"Yes, Sayaka-san?"

"Did you understand what Fuyuno-sensei was saying about that poem earlier?"

"Ah..." Hitomi notices Madoka watching Sayaka and hesitantly answers. "Yes, the poem was referring to the change of seasons and how time seems to pass by when we least expect it."

Sayaka hums thoughtfully. "That makes more sense than what he was saying! Man, you're always great at explaining this kind of stuff!"

Madoka tries again. "Sayaka-chan—"

"But, I mean, why do we even have to learn that stuff anyways? Ancient Japanese is so...old, you know? That kind of stuff is kinda already phased out."

Hitomi places her bentou down and frowns at Sayaka's deliberate attempts at ignoring Madoka but answers nonetheless.

"It is a part of our history and culture..."

"I know," Sayaka tells her with a sigh. "But those words... no one even uses them anymore!"

Madoka grasps at her chopsticks in frustration and Homura offers her a box of strawberry milk.

"...Thank you, Homura-chan, but I still have the one you gave me earlier," she tells her as she gestures to the unopened one sitting by her side.

Sayaka continues to chat with Hitomi about schoolwork and as the tension continues to the build, Homura decides that she needs to end it, somehow. She wraps up her bentou before standing abruptly.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka peers up at her curiously.

"Madoka, I'm going to go to the classroom first," Homura tells her and without waiting for a reply, she grabs Sayaka by the arm and forces her from her seat. "Miki Sayaka, come with me."

"H-hey!" Sayaka tries to protest but when she sees Mami looking at her, she sighs before packing up her half eaten bentou and follows after Homura.

She is lead towards the classrooms, noticing that the hallways are mostly empty due to lunch and when they're in front of their own class, Homura finally turns to her.

"How is your soul gem?" Her words are as blunt and straight to the point as ever.

Sayaka glances around, making sure they really are alone before she summons her soul gem for Homura to see.

It's brighter than expected and she nods in approval before Sayaka sends it back to her finger.

"Aww, is the transfer student worried about Sayaka-chan?" Sayaka teases and Homura merely ignores her, pivoting on her foot and flicking her hair behind her. She enters the classroom with Sayaka trailing after her. "I told you—that I'd be fine," Sayaka tells her as the fake humor drops from her voice. She debates her next words and then sighs. "...Thanks for sending Mami-san after me though. I... was in a bad place yesterday."

Homura is surprised at her honesty and glances her way before nodding.

And then Sayaka gives her a real grin this time. "Seriously, if you had been the one to find me, I probably would've tried stabbing you, transfer student. Though, that might be good therapy or something..." she seems almost wistful.

Homura stares at her before continuing her walk to her seat. "You are welcomed to try, Miki Sayaka. Even after all your attempts, you have yet to succeed once."

Sayaka blinks. "When have I—"

The bell chimes and drowns out her question and when Madoka and Hitomi enter the classroom they find Sayaka staring at Homura's back with a puzzled expression.

She catches their worried looks though, and to their relief, throws them a smile that looks less strained and more... normal, somehow.

/

"Are you sure we should go first, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks as she casts a worried look both to Homura and Sayaka.

"Yes, I just want to teach her a few basics and then we'll join you," Homura says as she waves her off.

"Are you sure I shouldn't come along as well, Akemi-san?" Mami tries to insist in assisting in Sayaka's 'magical girl lesson' but Homura is adamant as she shakes her head.

"We won't be long; you two can go first."

Mami and Madoka share a dubious look before they concede.

"Okay...uhm... we'll see you soon, Homura-chan, Sayaka-chan." Madoka pauses. "Be careful." She gives Homura a pointed look and the other girl nods.

"Don't do anything reckless, you two," Mami warns them and then the two head off to Mami's apartment while Homura and Sayaka watch until they turn the corner.

Sayaka is thinking about last night and Mami's pep talk and she turns to Homura, questions shifting through her mind.

"Hey... are you sure, it's uhm... that is, Mami-san..." Sayaka struggles with her words and Homura waits for her to voice her thoughts. "Uh..." Sayaka scratches her cheek nervously and shakes her head. "Never mind. So, I don't understand what you want to 'teach me' or whatever, but Mami-san... already taught me stuff yesterday. Unless you're going to teach me about my weapons? But aren't you the wrong person to ask anyways? I don't think I've ever seen you pull out a sword from that shield of yours..."

Homura wonders what Sayaka was about to ask her and gives the other girl an evaluating look.

"...Did something happen with Tomoe Mami yesterday?"

Sayaka flinches and she places her hands on her hips. "W-What makes you think that?"

"You are a horrible liar, Miki Sayaka."

Sayaka frowns at her. "Well sorry, not everyone can be an emotionless robot like you." She thinks briefly and amends her words. "...Most of the time."

"Regardless, is there something about Tomoe Mami that should be addressed?"

Sayaka shrugs. It... wasn't like Mami had actually done anything, really, besides save Sayaka from turning into a witch. Her words had been unsettling, of course, but she had a reason to say them and they had helped snap her out of her depression. And after that heart-warming conversation, they had carried on like normal, proceeding to patrol around the city with Mami pointing out things like the reliable senpai she truly is...

"...Was just wondering what kind of snacks Mami-san made for today, that's all," Sayaka lies.

Homura sighs but lets the subject drop. She has better things to do right now and the issue with Mami and Sayaka will have to wait.

"... To answer your earlier question," Homura tells her as she crosses her arms across her chest, eyes staring into the distance. "There are some things you do need to be taught but now is not the right time to teach you."

Sayaka blinks. "Huh...?"

Homura turns to her. "There is another magical girl in the city—and I have suspicions that she is being manipulated by Kyuubey."

Sayaka's eyes widen. "Wait, what? Another magical girl? Shouldn't we, I don't know, stick together just in case she tries to attack us? Especially if she's working for Kyuubey? We need to warn Mami-san and Madoka—"

Homura waves off her concern. "Though I say manipulated, it's not like she isn't someone to see reason. She will also avoid Tomoe Mami for the time being, so they are safe for now."

"How can you be so sure?" Sayaka demands. She's starting to get real tired of Homura's weird puzzles and the fact that she seemingly knows everything.

"Hm," Homura debates telling her the truth and figures that a little knowledge wouldn't hurt. "The girl we are about to meet, was once Tomoe Mami's partner; they both protected Mitakihara together, but something occurred, the details of which I'm hazy on, and they separated around a year ago."

Sayaka's eyes widen in surprise. "Mami-san had a partner...?"

"Unfortunately, she is similar to you. We may have to fight her first before she will see reason."

"Tell me what you really think of me, transfer student," Sayaka mutters before she stops to think for a moment. "Hey, does that mean you think I fight better than Mami-san? Since you know, I have these swords so you think I'm like, awesome or something." She puffs out her chest and grins. Never mind the fact that Homura has never seen her fight, now that she thinks about it...

Homura looks at her blankly. "No, I trust Tomoe Mami more to take care of Madoka. As for why you are here... Madoka would suspect something if I went off on my own. You are here for that reason only."

Sayaka sighs, deflating instantly. "Way to make a girl feel wanted, transfer student."

"Follow me, Miki Sayaka. We will meet her halfway," Homura tells her before leading her further into the cityscape.

/

Sayaka immediately jumps back when a large spear snakes down and embeds itself into the concrete in front of them. Homura is unaffected and remains rooted to the spot.

"Heh, so which one of you is 'Akemi Homura?'" a voice asks and they glance up to see a red haired girl peering down at them from the building top with fangs bared; Sayaka think she looks even more cat-like than Homura. "No matter," the mystery girl continues without even waiting for a reply. "I'll just find out after I beat some sense into the both of you!"

A flash of light and then Homura is transformed, ears and tails flickering in anticipation.

"Miki Sayaka, do not interfere," are her only words of warning before she disappears.

Sayaka can only blink before the irritation she usually feels at the other girl explodes and she transforms as well. There's a clash of metal on metal and she turns in surprise to see Homura and the mystery girl locked in a battle of shield versus spear and it's easy to see that Homura is losing.

When had they...?

Sayaka immediately summons her own sword in her hands and charges towards them.

\\

Though Homura had told Sayaka not to interfere, her thoughts are going a mile a minute as she tries to figure out a way to incapacitate Sakura Kyouko without decapitating her; all her weapons are meant to hurt and maim after all and she doesn't think a bullet-ridden Kyouko would be up for much conversation no matter how much food she bribes her with.

The easiest way to end it would be to knock her unconscious and then drag her to Mami's where they could talk in peace. Maybe she should've brought Mami instead after all. Her ribbons would've at least stopped her in her tracks.

Time magic it is then.

When the scenery turns grey, Homura immediately rushes behind the frozen girl and uses her arm to deliver a swift chop to the base of her neck before moving away.

When time resumes, however, Homura remembers why she always avoided physical confrontations with Sakura Kyouko, time magic or not.

Expecting her to fall unconscious is her first mistake.

Not having a backup plan is her second.

Though Kyouko stumbles at the hit, it only serves to add fire to the fuel and Homura suddenly finds angry eyes turning to her as Kyouko brings her arm down, weapon swinging back and heading straight for a surprised Homura.

She brings her shield up even as she casts for time to stop but just as her magic clicks into place, the sharp tip of the spear impacts her own metal shield and she doesn't know how, but it effectively disrupts her magic and she finds herself defending against the full brunt of Kyouko's strength.

Melee and strength have never been Homura's main focus and she's once again reminded just how strong and fast Kyouko is when she tries to dodge but is intercepted and another attack against her shield sends her teeth rattling and her arm reeling as she tries to keep from being pushed back.

Kyouko's grinning at her with a feral grin. "Nice try, kitty cat."

Homura grits her teeth and her ears press down unconsciously as she struggles against Kyouko's brute strength.

"Ha! Sayaka-chan to the rescue!"

The two weapon locked girls part, jumping out of the way as a sword slashes down in between them with Sayaka stumbling in afterwards as her momentum keeps her moving forward. It's enough of a distraction and Homura quickly stops time once more.

Wincing at the new pain developing in her arm, she reaches into her shield and pulls out a grenade—forget any kind of hesitations, Kyouko is a monster at melee and she doubts this will even hurt her. She tugs off the pin and throws it, watching as the grenade hovers in the air before she runs to Sayaka and grabs her hand.

"W-Whoa!" Sayaka continues her pitch forward but Homura stops her and tugs her upright.

"Quick, we need to move." She keeps a firm grip on Sayaka's arm as they put distance between them and the ticking time bomb.

click

Sayaka gasps as the explosion rocks the area, sending dirt and dust into the air.

"W-What the hell was that!? You killed her?!"

"No," Homura says as she rubs at her now tingling arm absently, "something like that won't kill her."

"W-Wait!" Sayaka eyes widen as she remembers where they are. "Y-You used a bomb in a public area! W-What about all—"

"This district is slated for demolition next week."

Homura grabs Sayaka again and pulls her away as a familiar spears slams into the spot they had been standing on.

"Damn, you almost got me pretty good, kitty cat." Kyouko coughs as she steps out from the cloud of dust that's still gathered around the area. "Luckily I always have a reinforced barrier around my body."

Ah, that would explain why her usual KO hit hadn't worked.

Homura takes a moment to evaluate Kyouko's appearance: she has visible cuts on her body and there's wisps of smoke coming from charred pieces of her clothes but other than that, she looks fine.

Sayaka is surprised and a small part of her is slightly disappointed.

Homura remains quiet and reaches into her shield once more while Kyouko narrows her eyes at the movement. Sayaka automatically draws back, worried about more explosives and tenses when Homura pulls out something and chucks it at the opposing

magical girl. Sharp crimson eyes take in the object and Sayaka immediately grips her sword tighter.

...And almost drops it in confusion when she sees the girl reach up to snatch the box of pocky from the air.

"...what?" Sayaka mutters.

"There's more where that came from," Homura tells Kyouko and suddenly they can hear the sirens around them; the explosion had obviously gained more attention than wanted. "We should leave before we are caught." She tilts her head and looks at Kyouko. "We have some friends we need to meet, would you like to come?"

Kyouko stares at the pocky and then back to Homura.

"There will be cake."

A grin appears on Kyouko's face. "Sure. Can never say no to free food."

Sayaka blinks but then Homura and the strange magical girl are leaving the scene and she can only follow after them.

\\

Madoka glances around nervously though when her sight falls upon the girl sitting next to her, she finds herself frowning in disapproval in a manner similar to the expression that Mami is also wearing. Apparently, Homura's 'magical lesson' had all been a ruse and she had merely wanted to confront this 'Sakura Kyouko' and Sayaka had merely been brought along for the ride.

Now they're sitting in a tense atmosphere as Sayaka glares at Kyouko who's working on her second slice of cheesecake while Mami frowns at Homura and Homura is, for some reason, ignoring her glass of milk.

"Ahh," Kyouko finishes the last bite, making sure to scrape the plate clean before she turns to Mami. "Your cooking's gotten better, Mami."

Mami blinks in surprise. "A-Ah, thank you, Sakura-san."

"SO, transfer student, are you finally going to explain why you invited this..." Sayaka stares at the other girl for a second, "...street rat?"

Kyouko narrows her eyes at the insult. "You wanna take this outside, blueberry? I can easily wipe the floor with you—maybe help you get rid of that novice stink."

"W-What!?" Sayaka slams her hand onto the table and the dishware clinks to Mami's disapproval.

"Miki-san, Sakura-san, please," Mami's voice manages to diffuse the situation though they continue to glare at each other across the table. "Akemi-san?" Mami turns to Homura. "Although I am glad to welcome Sakura-san into my house, I assume there is a reason you invited her to join us?"

Homura, who has remained quiet, nods. "Yes. But first, I need to use the restroom; please excuse me."

The other four girls watch as Homura stands and heads towards the bathroom, entirely ignoring the escalating situation and Mami decides to at least fill the silence with small talk.

"Sakura-san... how have you been?"

Kyouko scratches her cheek and leans back on her arms. "Eh, you know, same ol' same ol. You?"

Mami reaches for her teacup. "Same, as well." She takes a sip. "Are you still stationed in Kazamino?"

"Eh, you know me," Kyouko shrugs as she gestures to nothing. "Can't stay at one place too long; I actually got back 'bout a week ago."

"Oh?"

As Kyouko and Mami continue their awkward idle chit chat, Sayaka and Madoka share a look. Sayaka is wondering what happened to drive the two apart while Madoka is wondering why these two supposed friends seemed more like strangers.

/

Homura shuts the door behind her and locks it before she finally drops her mask and winces at the pain in her arm. She slowly flexes her left hand to determine the damage. Slight movement sends sharp waves of pain up and down her arm and she suspects that there are hairline fractures in her bones; Sakura Kyouko and her brute strength really can't be underestimated. Good thing she is on their side.

Or... will be.

She sighs, knowing that Mami and Kyouko will most likely notice her use of magic but she has no choice and summons her soul gem into her hand as her ears and tail show up like always. She concentrates on at least making the pain tolerable and when she can finally move her hand comfortably, her soul gem is visibly darker and too much time has passed for her liking.

Regardless, she flushes to keep appearances and then washes her hands.

"Did the transfer student eat something bad?" Sayaka asks as she looks to Madoka.

Madoka shakes her head. "We had the same things in our bentou and I'm fine..."

"Maybe all that milk is finally getting to her," Sayaka comments and then frowns when she hears a snore from the now napping Kyouko; waiting for Homura had taken too long and she had said to wake her when she returns. Whether it can attest to her belief in her own abilities, the fact that she doesn't think they are threats or that she still thinks of Mami as an ally, no one can say.

But finally, Homura emerges from the bathroom and takes her usual seat at the table.

"Everything alright there, transfer student?" Sayaka voices Madoka's concern though they notice when Mami turns expectant eyes towards Homura.

Homura knows that Mami definitely felt that surge of magic; Sayaka is still getting used to being a magical girl and having Mami, Homura and Kyouko all gathered in one area is most likely overloading her magical sensors. It'll be a while until she will be able to distinguish between the different signatures.

Kyouko yawns suddenly as she sits up. She had only been resting her eyes and hadn't really fallen asleep.

"Don't tell me you couldn't even feel that, novice?" Kyouko asks as she gives Sayaka an incredulous look.

"Feel what?" Sayaka glares at her in response.

"Heh, you really are green, or I guess in your case, blue?" she ignores the snarl Sayaka gives her. "She was using magic in the bathroom. Obviously her arm was bothering her so she went to heal it up." Kyouko pulls up her sleeve and flexes. Her arm is thin but there's muscle and she grins. "I play for keeps and kitty cat definitely felt that even though she blocked. She's lucky though, most of the time a hit like that sends the recipient to the hospital. I put *a lot* of magic in my attacks; that shield is tougher than it looks."

Madoka frowns at Homura and Mami frowns at Kyouko.

"Is your arm okay, Homura-chan?" Madoka turns to her with worried eyes.

"Yes. As Sakura Kyouko stated, I healed it already, Madoka. I'm fine," she lies.

Madoka stares at her with narrowed eyes and scoots over so that she's right next to Homura. She ignores her protests, reaching over and pushing her sleeve up. The slight pressure hurts—but it's tolerable and other than a brief flinch, Homura's face gives nothing away as Madoka examines her arm for injuries.

"Should be all healed though; she used quite a bit of magic," Kyouko notes as Madoka continues to poke and prod Homura's arm. "Too much, maybe." She shrugs.

Here, Mami sighs. "Akemi-san's magic is a bit different from ours, Sakura-san. A large injury on her body could potentially be fatal if she doesn't have enough grief seeds on hand."

Her words cause Madoka to grip Homura's arm tighter and this time Homura bites back a whimper of pain.

"Huh, so Kyuubey wasn't lying about her magic being different," Kyouko notes as she gives Homura an evaluating look. "Are the other things he said true then too?"

Sayaka scoffs. "I wouldn't trust that white... thing if I were you."

"Hey," Kyouko gestures to everyone, "correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't we all magical girls? Not sure about kitty cat over there and pinkie is definitely non-magical, but, as far as I know, Kyuubey's the only one who can grant something like that. You know, that whole make a wish, get a contract thing? He's the reason some of us are still alive today," the teacup in Mami's hand shakes and Sayaka balls her hands into fists, "so, why wouldn't I trust Kyuubey? From what I hear, kitty cat is the one messing with the protocol."

As she talks, Homura bristles at the continuous use of the nickname Kyouko gives her. Even though it's similar to what Takkun calls her, the tone in Kyouko's voice is more mocking than of affection. She glances over to Madoka who's now absently staring at her arm but she can tell the smaller girl is visibly upset with talks of wishes and contracts, most likely thinking about things she shouldn't be thinking about. Homura hesitates briefly, knowing that they aren't alone but Madoka's well being has always been her priority so she pushes down her embarrassment.

Madoka blinks when she suddenly feels something brushing against her cheek and she turns to see a pair of cat ears in her line of vision.

She gives Homura a small smile, releasing the hold on her arm and instead placing her hands atop her head to stroke her ears.

Unaware of Madoka's earlier nervousness, Sayaka shakes her head at Kyouko. "I went into this knowing everything but the same can't be said for everyone else. Do you want to know why we don't trust Kyuubey and why we're avoiding him like the plague?" Kyouko raises her eyebrow. "Because we figured out where witches come from."

Kyouko blinks. "Seriously? So what, Kyuubey's worried that he's gonna be out of a job? That's why he went looking for me?" Kyouko shrugs. "Alright, I'll bite. So where do witches come from then? Is that why you're collecting used grief seeds—so you can do something with them?"

Mami decides to step in. "Sakura-san, do you know why we clean our soul gems?"

Kyouko gives Mami an incredulous look. "This kitty cat definitely did something to your head. Kyuubey taught us this stuff when we first contracted. The soul gem is the source of our power. If we don't clean it, we'll run out of magic."

"Heh," Sayaka looks at Kyouko and the red-head feels a wave of irritation. For some reason, she really wants to wipe the smug expression off of the other girl's face, preferably with something sharp.

"Miki-san..." Mami's voice sends a small shudder through Sayaka's body and she sighs, immediately dropping her air of arrogance. She shouldn't feel proud that she knows more about this than Kyouko. It's not something anyone should be proud to know...

"Sakura-san," Mami decides to cut to the chase, "a witch is a magical girl who has fallen into despair."

Madoka shuts her eyes and Homura instinctively leans in closer to comfort her.

Kyouko's eyes widen as she turns to Mami. "What...? What the hell are you talking about Mami. Witches... are born from curses... or whatever the hell Kyuubey said."

"Curses of a magical girl," Sayaka informs her. "Why do you think a soul gem needs to be cleaned? Why do you think we run out of magic when we don't? Why do you think grief seeds look so similar to soul gems...?" she pauses and lets Kyouko digest the information. "Can you see now why we don't want to deal with that *thing* now?"

Kyouko slams a fist into Mami's table and this time it's enough to cause some of the milk from Homura's full cup to spill onto the table.

"..." It reminds Homura she still needs to drink her milk and both she and Mami level Kyouko with a glare that's ignored.

"Alright, give me a reason why I should believe you? I came here to hear your side of the story, but all I'm learning is that kitty cat is a nut job and she's done something to your minds. Why should I..." she looks around the room and as soon as her eyes lock onto Sayaka's her voice trails off as she feels something pass through her mind.

—despairequaltothemiracle—

"...what the hell was that?" she demands as she grabs her head.

Sayaka looks at her curiously before she shrugs. "That would be your reason."

Homura's tail flickers unconsciously as she takes this in. It seems that after so many repeats, everyone really is starting to remember certain things. Whether it was a good or bad thing, only time could tell.

-youwitch!—

Kyouko pales and she places a shaking hand onto the table. "W-What the hell is this...? You mean we become the things we're supposed to kill...? That I'm going to eventually turn into a witch?!" Her voice continues to rise with each word and her body is moving out of her seat until a quiet voice cuts through her rant.

"No," Mami tells her. "You will *not* become a witch, Sakura-san. None of us will." Mami's voice is calm and Kyouko blinks at her before sitting back down. "We *will* live. We *will* survive this."

Homura tenses immediately and straightens up, pulling away from Madoka to stare at Mami. It startles Madoka into opening her eyes. She notices the way Homura's ears and tail stand up and she reaches over to calm her down.

"...Homura-chan?" pink eyes glance at Mami but all she can see is the usual composed blonde.

Homura ignores her and lavender eyes watch Mami closely, looking for familiar signs.

Before anything happens however, Homura blinks as a feeling washes over her and Kyouko looks around a second later.

"It seems we will need to cut our reunion short, Sakura-san," Mami notes with regret in her voice.

"Yeah," Kyouko grunts though she doesn't make any attempt to move.

"...A witch?" Madoka guesses quietly as she runs a calming hand down Homura's back. She's at least glad that it seems to be working as Homura slowly relaxes under her touch.

Sayaka turns to her in surprise. "What? Where?"

Kyouko groans. "You are such a baby; someone like you won't last long."

Sayaka growls at her. "What did you call me?"

"I seem to recall you having trouble as well, Sakura-san," Mami states and to everyone's surprise, Kyouko blushes lightly.

"Well, I never was as bad as this girl," she mutters though they can sense that the fight has left her.

"Hmm," Mami suddenly smiles as an idea occurs to her. "You know, I think this would be a perfect opportunity for you to pass on your wisdom to your kouhai."

Kyouko stares at her. "My what?"

Mami calmly places her teacup down onto her table. "Your kouhai," she repeats. "Due to her inexperience, Miki-san has picked up a few unfortunate habits while fighting and seeing as you are also a melee combatant, Sakura-san, I believe it would be best for you two to work together and for you to teach her!"

Kyouko's mouth drops opens and Sayaka slams her hand onto the table, earning her another frown from Mami but this time she is too angry to notice.

"She is not my senpai!" Sayaka shouts as she points to Kyouko. "What could I possibly learn from this street rat?! How to inhale a cheesecake in thirty seconds!? How to finish a box of pocky without chewing!?"

Kyouko growls at her and her own hand joins the table, dishware clattering and Mami tries hard to calm her anger.

"As if I'd want to teach this novice anything! She probably doesn't even know how to wipe her own—"

Mami clears her throat angrily. "Sakura-san. I believe you have a witch you need to catch. Please take Miki-san with you."

"I don't—"

"Why should—"

"AHEM." Mami grits her teeth and gives them a warning smile.

"...You better not hold me back, novice." Kyouko grumbles as she stands.

"...Don't cry when I get the witch first, street rat," Sayaka tells her as she follows after her.

"And use the front door!" Mami shouts but the two are too absorbed in their glaring contest as they exit through Mami's balcony door.

Kyouko transforms and smirks at Sayaka. "Follow me, novice. Unless you're too chicken," she says as she leaps off the building, zig-zagging her weapon through the building walls to use as leverage to jump down.

Sayaka stares after her and quickly transforms. Kyouko is already grinning at her from below and she gulps nervously. At least there is no one watching them...

"Miki-san!" Mami tries to get her to stop but Sayaka ignores her and jumps off.

None of them know if she makes it and Madoka stares at the balcony in fear, frozen in her spot. She wants to check on Sayaka but is too afraid to see what had happened.

"...She should be fine," Homura tells her quietly. Her eyes are closed and she looks content as Madoka continues to trace soothing circles on her back.

Madoka nods hesitantly. If Homura said Sayaka was fine and Mami didn't seemed bothered at all, she had to be fine, right? Another glance to the balcony and then Madoka turns back to Mami.

"U-Uhm... are you sure they'll be okay, Mami-san? They... didn't seem to get along..."

Understatement of the year.

"They should be fine," Mami reassures her with a smile. She can hear the soft purr from Homura as Madoka absently reaches up to scratch her ears and she closes her eyes in amusement. "And if they aren't..."

Madoka can hear the threat in Mami's voice and nods. She glances over and can see Homura now peering at Mami curiously.

"Akemi-san?"

Ears twitch in response.

"You should drink your milk before it goes bad."

Homura immediately moves away from Madoka to grab her cup.

"Would you like more cheesecake, Kaname-san?" Mami asks as she watches Homura mop up the spilled portion of her drink with a nearby tissue before drinking her milk hurriedly.

"Uhm... S-Sure, Mami-san. Thank you..." she murmurs softly.

Mami moves to stand. "Would you like more milk, Akemi-san?"

Homura licks her lips and nods. "Yes, please."

"I'll be right back," Mami tells them, placing the empty plates, cups and used napkins onto a tray before heading to the kitchen.

"...Homura-chan." Madoka turns to the other girl who has moved on to eat her cheesecake.

Homura tilts her head curiously but the smaller girl shakes her head.

"N-Nothing..."

Madoka has no idea how to voice her sudden trepidations and places her hands in her lap. She suddenly misses the warmth from Homura and watches as the other girl takes another bite out of her cheesecake.

Will they really be okay...? Or is this the calm before the storm...**?**

AN: Here it is ! Kyouko is finally here~ As always, thanks for reading/reviews from the usual people :)

Passerby-A: You are welcomed to correct me, I have no fans but plenty of awkward grammar :) Constructive criticism is always welcomed as well. If I was really discouraged I would've stopped updating by now. I do like reading about things that other people may see that I may not. Makes me think about stuff and then I'll angrily write you a reply in the next AN.

Psykoakuma: I apologize, I reread your review and you didn't flat out say that, but I kind of lumped it together with Passerby-A's review stating that it is strange that Sayaka would want to contract. You two were saying similar (yet different) things so it kind of read as such. HomuMadoMadoHomu

Now, as you notice, the hiatus hasn't been issued yet, but that is because I still have parts written. However, I have kind of stopped working on this story though I am diligently editing the chapters so that things make sense. My interest is kind of not really here anymore however. for now I will try and continue my weekly updates. \[o.o]/ And.. yes this chapter is pretty long isn't it. T-The next one will be shorter :(If not, then chapter 15 will be short for sure. If not then chapter 20...

I rewatched a few episodes of the anime and *cries for Homura* where's her happy ending :(

Chapter 12: unsteady

AN: Warningsss and stuff. Kind of like chapter red on white warnings. Maybe a bit worse though... ... . maybe a bit more sad. don't say I didn't warn you.

"**A**nd that! Is how you do it!" Kyouko declares proudly as she slams the butt of her spear into the concrete.

As the barrier around them warps and disappears back into the dilapidated buildings found within the older districts, Kyouko discards her transformation and reaches into her jacket pocket for her usual box of pocky.

"Well, novice? Hope you were watching closely, maybe picked up some pointers," she smirks over to Sayaka who recalls her transformation as well.

"Eh, I've seen better," Sayaka shrugs nonchalantly and fakes a yawn. There's no way she's going to let Kyouko know that the other girl had impressed her and that her fighting style had scared her; it was raw and ruthless but very calculated and is everything that Sayaka wants to be. Now she's glad that Homura had been one to face off with her and isn't at all surprised she had been injured.

Kyouko is *good*.

Kyouko rolls her eyes and walks over to the grief seed that the witch had dropped. "Good thing it dropped one of these otherwise it would've been a waste of time. Alright, let's head back."

"Head back? To where?"

Kyouko glances at her as she pockets her new found loot. "Back to Mami's, duh."

Sayaka places a hand on her hip. "Really... so you're only going to kill one witch? Aren't you supposed to be 'teaching' me or something? Whatever." She doesn't wait for Kyouko to answer and summons her soul gem into her hand. "Since I'm already out here, I'm going to start patrolling."

Kyouko watches as she turns around and starts following a very faint trail. She had spotted it earlier on their way to subdued this witch and she had ignored it because she knew something that weak had to be a familiar.

Kyouko places a hand to her forehead and tilts her head up in exasperation. "Ugh. Of course you'd be exactly like Mami and waste your time on useless things like this." She sighs and quickly jogs over to the other girl who is now rounding the corner and disappearing from her view.

"Oy, bluey, wait up," Kyouko calls to her and Sayaka ignores her, strides widening as she tries to outpace the other girl. "I said wait, damn it!"

Sayaka glances behind her, angry words ready to be thrown and instead her eyes widen and she scrambles out of the way as a very pointy spear barely misses piercing through her shoulder.

"W-What the hell are you doing!?" Sayaka yells as she quickly turns around to face her opponent. She is surrounded by light and transformed a second later.

They're lucky they're in a very empty district.

Kyouko draws her weapon back into her soul gem and shrugs as she approaches her. "I told you to wait, you didn't, so I stopped you."

"...With your SPEAR?" Sayaka growls at her as she grips her sword in her hand. Her eyes narrow and she tenses as she watches Kyouko step closer.

"Yeah, I got you to stop, right?"

They stare at each other, eyes suspicious and body language tense when Kyouko suddenly smirks and pulls out her box of pocky.

"I'm way above your league and you know it. So cool your head already. Want one?" she tells her as she holds the snack out to Sayaka.

Sayaka narrows her eyes at the offered snack, insult on the tip of her tongue. She is tempted to knock the red box out of her hands but—

—*ifyouwastefood,I'llkillyou*—

—she shudders at the familiar threat and it's enough to knock some sense into her and she drops her transformation.

Kyouko watches her curiously, still holding out the pocky and she's surprised when Sayaka takes one.

"Thanks," she mutters and Kyouko nods before pulling out a stick for herself. "I'm still going after the familiar though," Sayaka tells her once she finishes her piece.

"You do remember what happens when we use too much magic, right?"

Sayaka dusts the crumbs from her fingers and nods. "Yeah, but it doesn't mean I'm gonna let those familiars run around killing people. You can go back to Mami-san's but I'm going after this first before I return." Her soul gem is re-summoned and she moves to follow the faint trail.

Kyouko debates for a moment and then sighs. "Ugh... hey, wait up, novice!"

This time Sayaka pauses and glances at her; she doesn't want another spear pointed at her after all. "Hurry up then, geez."

"You're so lucky you know Mami," Kyouko says under her breath as she hurries to catch up.

\\

Kyouko and Sayaka have yet to return and they have decided to work on their homework as they wait.

Madoka is completely distracted by things that seem more important than maths or science and she keeps sneaking glances to Homura who is breezing through her homework as indicated by the completed stacks of papers in front of her.

Mami is also concentrating on her report and Madoka seems to be the only one not actually getting any work done.

"Madoka."

Said girl jumps at the mention of her name and she accidentally bangs her knee against the underside of Mami's low coffee table.

"Ah," Mami blinks as her pencil carves a random line on her paper when the table moves and Madoka winces at the pain on her knee.

"Ouch..."

"I'm sorry, Madoka, I didn't mean to scare you. Are you alright?" Homura immediately reaches over and examines Madoka's leg for bruises.

Madoka blushes, both because of her earlier blunder and at Homura's intense stare. "I-I'm fine, Homura-chan. It's okay."

Homura ignores her, intent on making sure there are no lasting injuries. Madoka's high knee socks are in the way however, and her mind finally catches up to her body as she barely stops herself from reaching up to pull the fabric down. She glances up to Madoka who is staring at her red faced and she quickly moves her hands away and straightens up.

"I-If you say so..." Homura murmurs, light blush on her own cheeks as she stares at the table in front of her. "S-Sorry..."

Madoka swallows nervously and nods. "Y-Yeah. U-Uhm... w-why did you call me earlier, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances at her and then back to the table. "I wanted to ask if you needed help with the homework. You seem distracted and you have been having trouble with this chapter..."

"Ah..." Madoka blushes and then sighs softly. "I guess I'm just having trouble concentrating..."

Homura had obviously noticed and nods. "Maybe you should go home."

"Eh?" Madoka blinks in surprise and Mami glances at the two out of the corner of her eyes.

Homura moves to start packing her things. "There's really no reason for you to remain here and it will be good for you to have dinner with your family. Sakura Kyouko and Miki Sayaka will most likely take a while longer and I can walk you home and come back before they return."

"E-Eh? B-But Homura-chan... you're going on patrol tonight aren't you?" Not answering, Homura starts collecting Madoka's books, slipping them into Madoka's bag and she briefly wonders how Homura knows how she likes her things organized before she realizes she's being sent away. She quickly grabs her bag away from Homura. "Wait! Homura-chan!"

Homura stops and blinks at Madoka.

"You're going on patrol tonight, aren't you?" Madoka repeats and Homura nods.

"Yes, I have rested enough and we need to increase our collection of grief seeds."

"Then—"

"There really is no need for you to come along, Madoka. It's safer for you to stay at home anyways and as I said, it'll be good for you to have dinner with your family."

Madoka frowns. "But—"

"Come, Madoka, I will walk you home." Homura moves to stand and Madoka quickly pulls her back down.

"Wait, Homura-chan. A-Aren't you waiting for Kyouko-chan and Sayaka-chan to come back because you need to tell them something?"

Homura frowns this time and nods. "Yes."

"Can't I at least stay to hear what you need to tell them? I know it has something to do with... w-witches..."

Homura's eyes flicker to her briefly.

"Please, Homura-chan? You're...you're not deliberately trying to shut me out, are you?"

It's the hurt in her voice that has Homura relenting. "No..." she mumbles quietly. "I just thought you'd concentrate better at home. I'm sorry, Madoka."

Truthfully, that had been her plan all along but Madoka would eventually find out from Sayaka or Mami anyways and she guiltily bows her head.

Madoka blinks, immediately feeling bad and she reaches out and places a gentle hand atop Homura's head. "N-No, it's... Thank you for thinking about me, Homura-chan."

She runs her hand across where Homura's ears would be and Homura raises her head to look at her. Madoka smiles to show her there are no hard feelings and the way Homura peers at her as if she's asking for forgiveness has Madoka automatically reaching out and pulling her in for a hug.

Mami smiles to herself, thinking how cute her juniors are before she returns to her report.

/

In an act of desperation, Sayaka chucks one of her unlimited supplies of swords at the escaping familiar and is surprised when the attack follows through and stops the strange plane like creature short.

The illusions around her disappears and she wipes the sweat from her brow as she catches her breath.

For some reason her body feels heavy but she dismisses it.

"Geez, that was seriously sloppy. You're a melee fighter! Why are you throwing your swords around? If you wanna use projectiles go ask Mami how to make some guns!"

Sayaka sighs as her transformation disappears. "I know, alright? But it was getting away!"

Kyouko pulls out another box of pocky out from her pocket and tears it open. "Tch. You're not gonna last long if that's the best you can do."

Sayaka growls but she can't deny that she needs to work on her skills. "Whatever. I'll learn as I go along." She holds out her soul gem and catches whiff of another familiar nearby.

Before she can move though Kyouko is grabbing her hand roughly and Sayaka winces at the pressure on her wrist.

"Look at your soul gem! You're going to turn into a witch before you'll get a chance to fight another one!"

Sayaka pulls away. "What are you—" her voice trails off as she notices how dark her soul gem has gotten. "...huh."

A grief seed is placed besides her gem and as the darkness fades, her mind clears her body lightens and she blinks in surprise.

"You..."

Kyouko withdraws the grief seed and pockets it silently. "Your fast healing doesn't help you either. Because it's automatic you aren't able to keep track of just how much magic you are using until it's too late." She pokes Sayaka in the forehead. "Is there anything in that pretty little head of yours? Geez, no wonder Mami is worried about you, you damn novice."

The gratitude that Sayaka had felt is wiped clean and she just finds herself burdened by thoughts of her own weakness and decides she needs to move and do something or else she's going to be thinking about *things* and without another word, she heads towards an alleyway.

Kyouko shakes her head and follows after her.

When they exit to the other side, Sayaka stops and takes a moment to take in their surroundings. They're at the spot where she and Mami had had their 'heart to heart' yesterday and she stares at the vending machine silently. A quick debate and she heads towards it, Kyouko trailing after her.

She scans the limited choices of drinks and is at least relieved to see that the vending machine accepts credits and dips into her skirt pocket to pull out her phone, transferring the needed money for a cup of hot tea. Before she can push the button though, a hand reaches out and chooses a bottle of juice and Sayaka narrows her eyes at her.

"Thanks," Kyouko tells her as she retrieves her drink and gives Sayaka a toothy grin.

There's a low grumble from Sayaka's throat before she adds more credits to purchase her intended drink and waits as the cup drops down before filling with the liquid.

Tea is now associated with Mami and it calms her down for some reason.

Cup of tea in hand, Sayaka heads towards the lonely bench in the district, vaguely noticing that a few shops are still open though the streets are just as abandoned as they had been last night; the area is dying and will most likely become another one of those places scheduled for demolition in the near future.

She takes a seat as Kyouko unceremoniously drops in next to her and Sayaka sighs before she takes her first sip.

The tea is bland and hot and is nothing like the ones that Mami prepares, but it drains out her anger and all that's left is an empty feeling that's just there.

"I know, you know?" The silence is broken by her words and Kyouko glances at her in mild surprise but looks away again. "That out of all of us, I'm the weakest... even Kyuubey mentioned that I had very little potential as a magical girl... and the one that has the most just happens to be my best friend..." Sayaka shakes her head. "I can't do anything right..."

She's referring to other *things* and Kyouko takes a swig of juice before wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Well, it's not like you completely suck."

Her words do little to comfort and almost seem to make things worse.

"Uh..." Kyouko scratches her head as she scrambles to amend her words. "I mean... everyone sucks at one point, right? So, you just gotta work on not sucking so much."

"What?" Sayaka looks at her, face a cross between confusion and annoyance.

"Like, practicing and working harder... things like that." There's a pause and Kyouko pulls out that box of pocky once more. "Want one?"

Sayaka sighs but takes one to humor the other girl and they munch on the thin cookie in silence.

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

"Can you teach me? How to fight..."

Kyouko glances at her before she leans back against the bench and stares into the sky, absently noting that the sun isn't as bright now and they need to return soon.

There's something about Sayaka that reminds her of herself—from long ago—and she shakes her head.

"Nah, I can't teach you."

Sayaka leans forward to rest her elbows on her knees and sighs. "...I see."

It only serves to drop the mood further and Kyouko scratches the back of her head. "I mean, uh... I'm kinda bad at explaining stuff." She shrugs. "I'd just yell your head off or something."

"Hm..."

It's a sharp difference to the earlier angry girl and Kyouko finds she prefers that one over this one, any day.

"Get up," Kyouko demands as she hops off the bench and roughly pulls Sayaka with her. "You're an idiot."

There's a spark of something in Sayaka's eyes and Kyouko smirks at her. "Yeah, go with that. Anger is better than feeling whatever you were feeling, isn't it?"

Sayaka blinks at her words and gives Kyouko an evaluating look. "Oh..." the way her mouth twists into a grin has Kyouko stepping back.

"What?" she glares at her, not at all liking the look on Sayaka's face.

"Nothing," Sayaka tells her even as the grin remains. She straightens up and she finally notices that she's slightly taller than Kyouko. "For someone who talks so big, it's amazing that you're so small," Sayaka says as she deliberately gestures between the two of them, making apparent the gap in their height.

"What!" Kyouko growls at her. "You're only a little bit taller," she scoffs.

Sayaka grins, this time crossing her arms across her chest, careful not to spill the drink in her hand. "Mmhmm... maybe if you didn't eat snacks all the time you'd actually grow a little bit."

"Tch," Kyouko clicks her tongue at her and pulls out another stick of pocky. "Tell that to pinkie and kitty cat. They're even smaller than me."

Sayaka suddenly finds herself laughing even though she knows she should at least be defending Madoka. But the bluntness and the truth and the strangeness in the whole situation sends her into fits of laughter and Kyouko watches her with a raised eyebrow.

When she's finally done, there's tears in her eyes and her stomach hurts but she feels lighter somehow.

She swipes at her eyes and gives Kyouko an honest smile. "Thanks, I needed that."

Kyouko shrugs, pocky crunching in her mouth and she shakes her head. "You're weird, you know that?"

Sayaka doesn't bother to reply and somehow manages to finish her now lukewarm tea and deposits the empty cup into the nearby trashcan.

"Alright!" she yells out suddenly and her voice echoes in the empty district. "I'm ready to kick that—"

There's a familiar chime and she blinks at the interruption. She quickly pulls out her phone and finds there are five messages from Madoka, something she hadn't noticed earlier and she immediately opens them.

"Ah... transfer student wants us back for some reason," Sayaka informs Kyouko who shrugs. "...like an hour ago."

Kyouko smirks at that. "And who's fault is that? Yeah, but we should get back anyways. Pretty sure Mami wants to make sure I didn't off you or something."

Sayaka rolls her eyes but thinks for a moment as she stares at her phone. "Hey, what's your mail address?"

"Ha?" Kyouko blinks at her and notices the phone in her hands. "Nah, I don't have something like that."

"Ah..." Sayaka suddenly remembers her earlier nickname for Kyouko and the guilt hits her hard. "Whoops, sorry," she apologizes awkwardly as she rubs the back of her head.

Kyouko shrugs and finishes her juice before throwing the bottle into the recycle bin. "Whatever. Let's head back. You know the way?"

Sayaka nods, slipping her phone back into her pocket. "Yeah."

"Good. Loser has to buy dinner," Kyouko tells her and suddenly she's jumping up onto a nearby brick wall and dashing away.

Sayaka stares after her, mouth agape even as Kyouko slowly becomes a distant speck and then she's quickly looking around before stomping her foot into the ground.

"Why you little..!" she growls and quickly takes off in a dead run towards Mami's apartment.

\\

"They're taking quite a while, aren't they?" Mami asks as she glances at the time. She is at least satisfied with her progress on her report as she has mostly finished with her rough draft. "Did Miki-san reply, Kaname-san?"

Madoka shakes her head as she double checks her phone. "No... do you think something happened to them...?" Her voice is worried and her hands absently continue her actions of petting the now sleeping Homura. She amends that thought though when she sees lavender eyes peering at her, no doubt reacting to the sound of her voice.

Currently, Homura is curled up next to Madoka, head in her lap, eyes closed and face content; her guilt from trying to lie to Madoka earlier had her trying to appease the girl by distracting her which had somehow lead to cat ears and gentle petting.

Not that either girl minds. And Mami doesn't seem to care either.

Homura's ears perk up suddenly and she sits up, shaking her head to clear the sleepiness away.

"They are returning," Homura informs Madoka who looks close to pouting at her sudden withdrawal. "...They are moving very quickly."

"Eh?" Madoka blinks in surprise while Mami concentrates harder to locate their signatures; Homura's range is really a lot broader than her own.

"Ah," Kyouko's familiar red signature is suddenly detected and she frowns slightly as she sees that they really are moving twice the speed of normal. Sayaka's own signature appears a few seconds later. "What are they doing...?" Mami rises to her feet, thoughts of preparing for a confrontation when Homura stops her.

"...I believe they are racing each other," Homura comments dryly; the Sayaka and Kyouko in the previous timeline had done this a lot and it almost disturbs her how similar their actions are. She involuntarily shudders and pushes those memories away.

Mami stares at Homura and exchanges a look with Madoka before settling back into her seat. "That... sounds rather plausible. Sakura-san is quite competitive..."

Madoka nods. "Sayaka-chan too."

To Madoka's disappointment, Homura hides her ears and tail and she can only wait impatiently as the other two magical girls watch a race that she cannot see.

Homura suddenly stands and walks over to Mami's balcony to slide open the door. Moments later, Kyouko comes crashing in and if Homura hadn't taken the initiative, everyone would've been picking out glass shards from their bodies.

Homura knows this very well.

"Yo. Thanks," Kyouko tells her with a grin and though she is breathing harder than normal, she merely plops into the seat she had occupied earlier. "Bluey isn't here yet?"

Everyone but Madoka knows that Kyouko is merely asking to make a point; they can feel Sayaka's magical signature as she runs up the stairs to reach Mami's high rise apartment.

Homura closes the door and calmly takes her seat besides Madoka and they wait for the last of their party to show up.

Minutes later, the front door is thrown open and Sayaka bursts in. "D-Did..." she struggles to gulp in air and swallows heavily. "D-DidImakeit?" she asks quickly but

straightens when she sees Kyouko grinning at her, not at all out of breath and seemingly like she has been here for a while. "Ugh," Sayaka says as she collapses onto the floor.

"Sayaka-chan! Are you okay?!"

\\

After Sayaka downs two cups of water and recovers from her very impromptu race, they settle around the table and Homura clears her throat as she finally brings up the business that had been her original purpose for assembling them all together.

Now that Kyouko is finally in Mitakihara, she can start the rest of her plan to bring this timeline to become *the one*.

"I would like to tell you all the real reason for our meeting today. In two weeks time, a powerful witch, Walpurgisnacht will arrive in Mitakihara."

Blink.

"W-What?"

"What? I've never heard of Walpurgisnacht coming here!"

"Are you sure, Akemi-san? How do you know?"

"A W-Walpurga-what?"

Homura holds a hand out, stopping the sudden onslaught of questions.
"Walpurgisnacht," she repeats the name for Madoka and Sayaka's benefit and then faces Mami. "Will definitely be arriving in two weeks. I have a reputable source."

"Seriously?" Kyouko looks torn between excited and wanting to get the hell out of here. "Well, that's your problem."

"Yes," Homura agrees. "Since you have no real ties here, Sakura Kyouko, you are welcomed to leave."

Sayaka throws Homura a betrayed look and then glares at Kyouko for some reason. Mami glances at Kyouko but remains quiet.

"However, if you are willing to help…" Homura digs out something from her pocket before throwing it to Kyouko and the others see a flash of metal before she catches it. "You can have my apartment."

Kyouko stares at the keys in her hand. "Yeah?"

"It's not much better than the motels you usually frequent, but at least you won't have to worry about getting caught."

"Hm. Alright." Kyouko kind of wonders how she knows that but nonetheless slips the keys into her jacket pocket. She can still leave anytime she wants but having a place to stay while she is here will be welcomed.

Mami glances again at Kyouko but her eyes remain guarded.

"Tomoe Mami, Miki Sayaka, this is a mere formality but are you two willing to help defeat Walpurgisnacht?"

Mami blinks and looks affronted. "O-Of course, Akemi-san! This city is still under my protection—it is a given that I would be at the front lines during an attack on my city."

Sayaka slams her hand into Mami's table earning her a disapproving look and she gives Mami an apologetic smile before turning back to Homura. "Ha! Try and stop me from helping, transfer student!"

Homura nods and lavender eyes cut to Kyouko. "Sakura Kyou—"

"W-Wait!" Madoka interrupts though she flinches when all eyes turn to her. "I-I mean, if... if this Wal..purgisnacht is so dangerous, shouldn't I—"

"Madoka." Homura locks eyes with the other girl. "You promised."

Madoka stares at Homura. "B-But that was—"

Homura waves her off. "No, your help won't be necessary. Us four will be enough to defeat Walpurgisnacht; someone like you shouldn't involve herself with this. You aren't needed."

Homura's attitude is a complete 180 from earlier and Madoka looks close to tears with Homura's sudden harsh words. She turns her eyes to the floor and blinks back the tears, once again reminded of her uselessness and barely manages to keep a sob from escaping. Sayaka glares at the dark-haired girl as Mami tries her best not to sigh at Homura's awful social skills.

Not at all noticing Madoka's predicament as her mind latches onto thoughts of defeating Walpurgisnacht, Homura turns to Kyouko.

"Sakura Kyouko? Will you stay?"

Kyouko shrugs. "Hm, yeah, I guess. Nothing better to do anyways."

Homura nods. "I will draw up plans for our attack and will present it in another meeting in a few days. In the meantime, the most we can do is stock up on grief seeds and hone our skills. Now, if you excuse me, I will walk Madoka home before we start on our patrol. Madoka."

Without waiting for the girl to reply, Homura grabs their bags and heads towards the exit. Madoka glances at her and then gets to her feet to follow.

"Madoka," Sayaka looks at her friend who merely gives her a watery smile and Sayaka feels like punching Homura but if she does, she will have to do it another day because the door is closing and the two girls are now gone.

"Hey Mami, got anything to eat?" Kyouko asks after a beat.

Mami sighs but nods. "Yes, I have some leftovers from last night's dinner, if you would like?"

"Cool. You're still buying me dinner though, bluey," Kyouko reminds Sayaka and the girl sighs in exasperation.

\\

knock knock

"Madoka? Are you still awake?"

Madoka glances up from the homework she had been trying to solve (it was so much easier when Homura was helping her but thoughts of the other girl brings back that ache in her heart and she pushes those thoughts away) and turns to the door.

"Yes Papa, come in."

Amy makes a sound of protest but remains curled up in a bundle of blankets on her desk and Madoka gives her a fond smile.

The door opens and Tomohisa peers inside. "Homura-chan isn't back yet?" he asks with a frown.

Madoka glances at him nervously. "N-No... she said she would be back soon..."

Her father gives her a stern look before sighing. "I need some help carrying your Mama inside."

"Ahh," Madoka immediately stands and follows her father out to the front.

"...If ya wanna drink so badly... you should drink by yourself.."

Tomohisa and Madoka share a smile and between the both of them, they manage to get Junko to her room in no time; they are used to it after all.

"Shall I make some hot cocoa, Madoka?"

"Sure, Papa. Thank you."

Madoka takes a seat at the dining room table and the house is quiet all around them except for the sounds of Tomohisa tinkering with cups for the cocoa preparations.

"Papa?"

"Hm, Madoka?" his back is facing her but he turns and she sees the always kind Papa in front of her.

"How come Mama works so hard at her job? Does she like working that much?"

"Hmm," he looks thoughtful. "Your Mama likes the idea of working—that is the idea that she's working hard towards a goal. She likes putting in the effort and seeing the outcome of all her hard work."

"A goal huh?" Madoka thinks. "Like becoming president of the company?"

Tomohisa smiles. "Well, something like that. When you work hard like your Mama, eventually there's going to be people who see your efforts; sometimes it's the recognition you get that makes everything worthwhile. Sometimes though, Madoka, it's the process of getting there that makes everything worthwhile. Starting from the bottom and working hard until you reach the top; that in itself is worth more than recognition. The you that you build as you learn, that's the thing that makes it worth it in the end."

"The you that you build..." Madoka repeats as she looks to her dad who gives her another smile. "I don't even know what kind of 'me' I want to be, Papa... But...I want to be stronger... somehow. Strong, like Mama."

If she was stronger, she could help Homura and everyone else, right?

Tomohisa gestures to the cocoa and Madoka nods and removes the cup from the flame. She leaves it on the table and lets it cool down a bit before drinking.

"There are different kinds of strengths, Madoka. You have plenty of time to figure out who you want to be. I think, for now, being 'strong, like Madoka' is good enough."

"Mm..." Madoka thinks about it briefly but a sound from the front door distracts her thoughts and they both turn.

There's a click, the sound of rustling and a minute later Homura is crossing the threshold and looks up in surprise when she notices the two in the kitchen.

Tomohisa looks at her and though his face is kind his eyes seem disappointed. "You are back quite late, Homura-chan," he tells her and Homura guiltily looks away.

"...Yes, I'm sorry."

"Luckily for you, Junko is already sleeping, but next time, please try to get back before midnight."

Homura stares at the floor. "... Yes, I'm sorry."

"Homura-chan." She looks to Tomohisa. "I know you're still getting used to this whole situation," his voice is gentle, "but please remember that it's no longer about yourself; if something were to happen to you, it wouldn't just affect you, but affect everyone else in this household. Do you understand?"

Homura fidgets with the edge of her skirt and bows her head lower. "Y-yes... I'm sorry."

Tomohisa smiles at her. "As long as you understand. Would you like some hot cocoa?"

Homura glances away and just so happens to cross gazes with Madoka.

"Papa's cocoa is really good, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her softly.

"A-Alright, thank you."

\\

As they prepare for bed, Madoka readjusts her blankets and turns to Homura; though it's dark she can still make out her figure through the peeking moonlight.

"D-Did something happen? For you to come home so late?"

Homura pauses at the word 'home' thinking how strange it is to refer to this place at such. "No," she denies. "I was merely trying to collect more grief seeds and lost track of time." Another pause. "It won't happen again."

"A-ah..." Madoka lowers herself onto the bed and hears Homura do the same. "Mm, it's a good thing Mama went out drinking tonight..."

Madoka hears more shifting as Homura tries to make herself more comfortable and she stares into the ceiling.

"Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"S-Since we don't have school tomorrow, would you like to go somewhere...?"

"I'm sorry, Madoka," and her voice really sounds apologetic. "Tomorrow I will be training with the others and for the rest of the day we will be patrolling."

Madoka wonders if Homura is including her in those plans, but her next words has that ache in her heart growing.

"You should stay at home and spend time with your family, Madoka. Let us handle things. I'm sorry, I'm a bit tired. Goodnight Ma—"

"Homura-chan. I-Is..I mean—would it—can I..." she knows that Homura is looking at her and makes up her mind. "I would like to come along. Would that be okay?"

"...alright."

Madoka smiles to herself in the darkness. "Thank you, Homura-chan. We should get some sleep. What time are you meeting everyone?"

"Around one or so."

"Sounds good. Goodnight Homura-chan." Madoka turns to face the wall and closes her eyes.

"...goodnight Madoka."

\\

When Homura wakes up a few hours later, it is not with a sob or a cry. Her eyes merely open slowly and she stares at nothing even as her eyes automatically adjust to the darkness.

These are the worst kinds of nights.

They aren't filled with nightmares and memories and dreams and death and lost regrets; they're filled with a deep and painful emptiness that cuts straight to her soul.

These are the kind of nights which corrupt and darken her soul gem and always leaves her on the edge of oblivion and insanity.

She can see Madoka sleeping next to her; face peaceful and so reminiscent of days long past and she can't help but move further away from the sleeping girl, afraid that she'll set ruin to her future just by being close.

Maybe she already has.

She's careful as she extracts herself from the bed; Madoka seems to have some kind of second sense when Homura wakes up during the middle of the night and she merely settles for sitting on the floor instead of leaving the room.

It works and Madoka remains asleep.

Homura leans back and feels the bed frame dig uncomfortably into her spine but pays it no mind; there are more important things to worry about, such as the fact that she needs to quietly piece herself together again without waking Madoka or falling into despair.

There's a soft weight suddenly against her leg and Amy's there, headbutting her thigh to gain her attention.

Homura reaches out with unsteady hands and Amy lets her pet her even though her touch is neither gentle nor stable. Her hand twitches and she suddenly has a thought and she quickly pulls her hand back, disgusted with herself and Amy meows in protest but Homura ignores her as she tries to come to grips with her sanity.

She curls up her legs so that she can rest her head on her knees and rocks back and forth, trying to will the thoughts away. Her cat ears are out and twitching listlessly and Amy licks her fingers in concern.

She pushes her away.

There's a blankness to her mind and she knows she's falling fast. Even if she were to clean her soul gem the corruption won't stop until she can stave off the source. She's already had one close encounter turning into a witch, she definitely can't have that happening again.

"Homura-chan...?" Madoka's sleepy voice has her gripping her legs tighter and she internally begs for Madoka to go back to sleep. "Homura-chan?" Gentle hands are laid atop her head and she flinches from the contact, immediately pulling away. She shuts her eyes tightly, gritting her teeth and silently begs Madoka to stay away.

The light is switched on and it startles her into opening her eyes though she blinks at the brightness and suddenly Madoka is there, next to her and she can feel her warmth.

"N-No..." she shivers fearfully and slaps her hand away. "S-Stay away..."

"Homura-chan?"

She hears Amy meow and hands try to reach for her again and she shakes her head, backing away. "N-No...You... you always... why do you always do this?"

"...Homura-chan?"

"You... you always... why can't..." she chokes and she can't control it as she feels anger weigh over her heart, clouding over her mind.

"Homura-chan?"

And Madoka's gentle voice sets her off and suddenly she's on top of her and her hands are tight around her neck.

"You..." her voice is cold and raw and as Madoka struggles to breathe, she sees none of the Homura that she has slowly started to fall in love with and can only see anger and hard pain.

"H-Homu...ra-ch...an..." her vision is dropping even as she tries to reach for the girl who is obviously crying out for help.

But suddenly she can breathe and she's gasping for air and gripping her now sore neck.

Amy hisses and Madoka knows who her savior is. She sits up, coughing lightly and rubbing at her neck before ignoring all that as a sudden flash of light gains her attention.

Her eyes blink. Homura has transformed and is suddenly pulling something out of her shield and her heart drops to her stomach as the steel from the knife glints off the light but before she can even think about screaming for help her blood runs cold as she watches Homura stab herself in the leg.

She clamps her hands around her mouth, muting her cries and Homura is in her pajamas once more as she wavers on her feet before pitching forward and collapsing to the floor in front of Madoka's bed.

Madoka can only watch as the blood from her leg soaks her carpet and she curls into a ball, sobbing to herself quietly as her mind tries to figure out what had happened. Amy headbutts her in the leg and she reaches out with a trembling hand, gathering her in her arms and holding her close to her face.

"Homura-cha**n..."**

AN: Yeah... Uhm... that ending part. I would like to say for the record I did not write 'to eternity' to offset this chapter... this chapter is like a combination of something I wrote before and had to revise (ie. rewrite like most of it) after I changed things in the previous chapters and I wrote this after I wrote 'to eternity.' That is all.

Thanks for reviewing, you nice people you. I reread my story earlier to see if I can get back into it... and I wrote this chapter so still no hiatus yet. If I can get past this hugeeee writer's block that is like 10 chapters ahead, I might be able to finish the story. I don't know.

metatalon: happy endings do exist! wait, that sounds like a title of one of the episodes of PMMM... and we know how well that ended :(wellll. I actually like happy endings! so maybe something will happennn

chimeraguard: it's hard to twist an established universe... but I will try!

Passerby-A: Thanks for the long reviews for all the chapters! Seeing your thoughts and stuff at least lets me know that someone is kind of understanding some things I deliberately try to point out or something. I don't even know if I'm making sense, I'm really sleepy as I type this reply... Homura gets hurt allll the time in this fic. Everyyyy day (because almost every chapter is a new day). I think I'm trying to set a record to see how injured she can get without actually dying... maybe this is why people think this fic is so bleak. hm. Wait, no, the reason I wrote this fic was to have a Homura with cat-like traits... wonder how it turned out this way but I do really like cat Homura though.

As to Sayaka's confession, that will be addressed in the next chapter (I think.) and that Hitomi thing really came outta nowhere in the anime. When I first saw it I thought it happened because Sayaka made her wish to heal Kyousuke and then it turned her luck into minus so Hitomi suddenly fell in love with Kyousuke. Ha.

As for Kyouko... that's the main thing I understood about her... food is like the gateway to her heart. Mami... needs to watcheed. Then again I'm not sure which way she's gonna go. Thanks again for the encouraging wordss and I changed my typo in the other story 'weariness' oops, thanks for that. As for the cycles thing and how they know Homura and Madoka, well I figured since Sayaka existed in Madoka's world, Homura still existed as well since she didn't exactly become the embodiment of hope. I'm sure I can make something up but for now I will leave it open-ended and you can be as confused about as it you want :)

Psykoakuma: thanks for reviewing every chapter as well :) you two are like the main reviewers and I always like reading your thoughts/opinions. I'm glad the characterizations I have for everyone isn't too crazy or OOC or something. The story is unfolding and turning into a mess at this point! Grrr Homura, why are you so sad. Why did I make her so sad. Why was she made to be so sad!? Thanks for the advice though. I think my problem is the story gets too long and complicated. I should've just made this fic about Homura who acts like a cat and left it at that.

Chapter 13: teamwork

She moves, hands twitching and there's something warm and comforting surrounding her. Sighing softly, she sounds almost content. The warmth stays and continues and the tightness around her neck starts fading away. She's reaching consciousness now and her eyes slowly flutter open. The first thing she sees in her vision is purple and she blinks sleepily, trying to focus on what's in front of her and wonders why her bed feels so uncomfortable.

She glances up and Homura is there, looming over her and suddenly everything comes crashing down; she remembers.

Her eyes widen and her first instinct is to get as far away as possible from the other girl. Her hand knocks into something hard and metal as she scrambles across the room. Her breathing and heartbeat is erratic from her panic as she now stares at Homura from besides her desk, effectively putting a good amount of distance in between them.

Homura's hand moves as if she wants to reach out but she forces it down and her eyes cast onto the floor. Her ears lay flat against her head and her tail is lying limp besides her. She bows her head, glancing briefly over to Madoka who's still watching her before lethargically getting to her feet. The fear she can sense from the smaller girl has her heart clenching in pain and she slowly walks over to their shared dresser, left leg dragging slightly from her semi healed injury.

Madoka stares and watches as Homura kneels carefully before opening the drawers. As her mind slowly calms, she takes note that Homura is already dressed for the day yet she's pulling out more clothes. Her range of vision is blocked from her position and she moves slightly to see what Homura is doing and when she spots that familiar green duffel, her chest tightens.

"...You..." her voice is rough and she places a hand to rub her neck. It's sore, though not as bad as she thought it would be.

Her voice gains Homura's attention and even from here, she can see the dark circles under her eyes and how awful she actually looks. She swallows heavily, ignoring the twinge of pain and clears her throat, ignoring that twinge as well.

"Y-You're leaving...?"

Homura lowers her head. "...I don't... I can't s-stay here..." she replies, the shirt in her hand crinkling as she clutches it tightly. "I... I might... I can't..." she shakes her head and quietly continues her task.

Madoka has no idea what she's feeling and though she knows she should tell her to stop, she can't. Her thoughts keep flashing to last night and she can't help it, she's scared. She's scared of *Homura*. Something she didn't think would ever be possible.

Not wanting to watch as Homura packs, her eyes glance around the room and when she spots her bed, her heart jumps as she remembers the blood—but she's surprised when the carpet is clean and there's no trace of crimson anywhere. She blinks, but no, the pain in her neck and the condition of Homura herself verifies that things had happened and she slowly stands to get a closer look.

With half her attention still warily on Homura, she approaches her bed and when she's close enough, she notices the carpet feels damp under her bare feet. She turns her head slightly to look back at the other girl who is now zipping her bag closed.

"D-Did..." lavender eyes look at her and she shudders slightly before pressing on, "did you clean the carpet?"

Homura nods. "...I was... I was t-trying to h-heal you... b-before I left..." Her stuttering has Madoka turning back to her and her worry pushes down her fear ever so slightly. "B-But..." Homura gestures aimlessly and Madoka understands.

She had woken up.

It's now that Madoka finally catches sight of something on the floor nearby and it takes her a moment to realize that it's Homura's soul gem. She blinks, the confusion of just seeing it lying there unattended abates her fear momentarily and she crouches to pick it up. It's cool to the touch and surprisingly bright despite Homura's obvious state of mind; she had most likely cleaned it but how many grief seeds had she used?

She feels Homura's gaze on her and as she holds the jewel, she realizes that she's pretty much holding Homura's soul in her hands. If she wanted to, she could break it and—

—the thought has her sick to her stomach and she shakes her head, trying to banish it away.

Homura is still watching her but Madoka is growing more alarmed by how calm Homura seems even though someone else is holding onto her life. Is it because Madoka is the one holding it... or is it because...?

She draws in a sharp breath, ignoring the pain in her neck and holds Homura's soul gem out in front of her. Her eyes remain on the other girl, watching her reaction as she closes her hand around the jewel, seemingly like she's about to crush it even though she knows(hopes) she's not strong enough to do so.

Regardless, Homura merely closes her eyes in obvious resignation and Madoka suddenly moves and clears the distance between them.

"W-Why..." She grits out and Homura flinches back in fear. "Why..!" she blinks back frustrated tears and angrily wipes them away.

Homura is staring at the floor. "I-I'm s-s-sorry..."

Madoka is quiet as she struggles to rein in her feelings. Her eyes take in the submissive Homura, the packed duffel besides her and she glances down to the soul gem that she's still holding in her hands.

It takes her a moment and she realizes that she's angry.

Really, truly, angry.

But at what or to whom, she's not quite sure.

She immediately drops down in front of Homura and the way the other girl jumps and then bows her head even lower makes her even angrier somehow.

"Homura-chan." Even she doesn't recognize her own voice—harsh and cold—and Homura whimpers at the sound, ears twitching lightly.

This close, and Madoka can see that Homura is visibly shaking. Her eyes quickly move to Homura's soul gem and she can see it darkening at an alarming rate and it feels like a bucket of ice water splashed against her heart.

She is making Homura fall.

"Homura-chan!"

Homura grabs her head in her hands and ducks down fearfully.

"Stop it!" Madoka reaches for her and pulls her close. "Stop it, stop it, Homura-chan. Please, snap out of it!" she whispers fiercely. "Please, Homura-chan, stop...!" she chokes and she realizes that she's crying. "Stop, please, Homura-chan..."

"I-I-I'm...s-s-sorry..."

She tightens her arms around Homura as hands clutch her desperately. "I forgive you, Homura-chan," she whispers, closing her eyes. It's true though. She does. Even though her neck still hurts and her heart thumps loudly in her chest; she forgives her. "I forgive you. P-Please... snap out of it. Please..."

"I-I-I'm s-s-sorry... s-so so s-sorry..."

\\

Madoka isn't sure how much time passes, just that Homura is still here and really, that's all that matters. Her hand gently strokes Homura's ears and the girl twitches lightly under her touch. They're lying on the floor now, with Homura curled on top of her, asleep, no doubt exhausted from yesterday and today.

Madoka knows exactly how she feels.

She glances down to Homura's soul gem that she's still cradling in her one free hand and though it's dark, there are still traces of purple peeking through. She stares at it, her own thoughts churning like the darkness spiraling in front of her eyes. She shifts lightly, careful not to jostle the sleeping girl and brings the gem close to her lips, pausing briefly before dropping a gentle kiss onto Homura's broken soul.

Her hand returns to her side and as she feels her own eyes drooping, there's a sound coming from the window and she turns her head to locate the source.

Amy.

Blinking, Madoka finally remembers that Amy has been absent through everything and she struggles to sit up even with Homura draped over her.

"Homura-chan...?" she doesn't really want to wake her up but seeing Amy there also reminds her of the time. Though Sundays usually started later in the Kaname household, being too late would make her parents start to worry and she really didn't want them walking in on...

Well, whatever this is.

"Homura-chan." Her hand moves down and she gently scratches her chin, earning her a soft purr. "Homura-chan," she repeats once more.

Madoka's voice has her stirring and she watches as Homura's ear twitches before her eyes open and she struggles to blink away the sleepiness.

Amy is getting impatient, however, and Madoka winces as she hears the scratching double in noise; she has a feeling that she'll need to spend some of her allowance repainting the window.

"Homura-chan? Can you get up? I need to let Amy in."

Homura jumps lightly, startled, and sits up, moving away from Madoka. "S-Sorry..." she apologizes and Madoka gives her a gentle pat on the head.

"It's fine," she tells her as she gets to her feet. Her body protests and groans from lying on the floor and her neck pulls uncomfortably but Amy's getting louder and she moves as quickly as possible over to the window to slide it open.

As soon as there's enough space for her, Amy hops in and Madoka smiles to her, watching her jump off the bed before padding over to Homura. She turns back to her window, completely pulling the curtains open and stares out into the late morning sky.

Despite how last night had ended and how the day had began, the weather looks picture perfect and she feels her heart lighten just from the view.

"Meow..."

"..."

"Meow."

"...i-is it?"

"Meow."

Despite how often she has heard their conversations, Madoka's lips twitch in amusement and she turns back to Homura and Amy. She can see that Homura has her head bowed, looking at something on the floor while Amy sits in front of her.

"Meow."

"...hm..."

"Meow."

Madoka sees Amy lower her head to push something forward.

"...t-that...sounds kind of good..."

"Meow."

Now very curious, Madoka steps closer to them and finally she can spot what Homura and Amy are looking at.

Sitting at Amy's feet is a very small field mouse that is still alive, if barely, as indicated by it's twitching feet.

"NO, Homura-chan!" Ignoring her sore body, Madoka quickly moves to intercept her and Homura pulls back at the sound of Madoka's voice. "No," she repeats as she crouches to place a hand on Homura's shoulder. "If you're hungry, Papa should already have food prepared."

Homura's ears twitch and her eyes flicker to the mouse before looking at Madoka. "...I-I wasn't going to eat it..." she denies, voice trailing off.

"Meow."

Her hand moves.

"Don't you even dare, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, voice firm. "If you want meat, we will get you meat—regular, *cooked*, meat," she emphasizes and tugs the other girl to her feet. "Come on, let's go get ready."

"Meow."

"NO."

"..."

\\

By the time they're done and presentable, it's close to lunchtime and when they wander out to the kitchen area, Junko has also joined the land of the living, though her eyes are bloodshot and she still looks rather tired.

"Well, look who finally woke up!" Junko comments and then puts a hand to her forehead. "Ahh... too loud."

"Morning Mama, Papa, Takkun," Madoka smiles at them as Homura trails behind her.

"...Morning..."

"Morning, Maroka! Kitty!"

"Takkun...not so loud..." Junko groans softly.

"Morning," Tomohisa smiles at them. "I'll get you girls some plates," he tells them as they take their seats and Amy jumps onto the table to join them. She already has a bowl of food out for her and she digs in eagerly.

Madoka briefly wonders what Amy had done with the mouse. When they had returned from the bathroom it was no longer there but she kind of already knows what had happened.

At least Homura hadn't eaten it...

"Any plans today?" Junko asks as she stifles a yawn before she reaches over to pet the grey cat fondly.

"Mm, we're going to meet up with Sayaka-chan and maybe do some shopping," Madoka answers easily, surprised that her voice remains steady as she openly lies to her mom.

Tomohisa hands her a plate of pasta and she passes it over to Homura who murmurs her own thanks as she accepts it.

"Sounds like fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Junko comments.

Homura and Madoka glance at each other.

"We won't."

Junko nods in approval.

/

Amy is left at home, busy playing with Takkun and when they leave the house, it is close to 1230pm.

As they walk to the abandoned parking lot that will serve as their temporary training grounds, Madoka has Homura's hand firmly grasped in her own. Homura's attempts at pulling away are met with glares and she eventually accepts the warmth almost guiltily.

After all, even though Madoka has forgiven her, she hasn't forgiven herself.

Their travel is quiet and when they finally arrive, Homura is suddenly hit with a wave of nostalgia as her eyes scour over the familiar landscape. Chained link fences and stacks of junked cars. Rusty old barrels and uneven piles of dirt. A place untouched and tucked away deep in one of the older districts.

A place where she had first taught herself how to use guns.

Her mind almost gets lost in the memories but she manages to barely pull away as she leads Madoka further inside.

Only a few minutes pass and then Mami joins them with a smile and a wave. If she notices their subdued body language and their intertwined hands, she chooses to ignore it and she and Madoka chat idly as they wait for Kyouko and Sayaka to arrive.

Ten minutes later with two no shows, Madoka sends her friend a text and when she replies, Madoka tells Mami and Homura that Sayaka will be late. Kyouko has no phone and they assume she'll join them when she wants to.

Homura merely flicks her hair behind her and the two magical girls that are present transform and begin their practice while one non-magical girl finds a comfortable place to sit and observe.

\

It's less than an hour later and Madoka stifles her fourth yawn in a row. She can't help it. She's bored. And Sayaka and Kyouko have yet to arrive.

Though it had been her own insistence in attending this 'training session,' she sort of regrets not staying at home as she finds her worries about Homura's stability are unwarranted. As soon as the girl had transformed and had pulled a gun from her shield, the ever 'cool and mysterious' Homura had returned and there's nothing for her to do here as Mami and Homura continue to set up and then destroy their targets. Watching them practice at first had been interesting, but even that had lost its appeal after a while.

She does however, notice that Mami and Homura's styles are completely different. Whereas Homura is more methodical and subdued, Mami is flashier and more aggressive.

A reflection of their personalities.

The fifth yawn breaks through and as Madoka wipes away the bored tears from her eyes she decides that maybe she should just go home or maybe walk around town by herself.

She glances over at Mami and notices her throwing Homura this look and the other girl stares at her for a moment. Mami says something, nodding to Madoka, and she can see Homura's ear twitch and her tail flicker before she nods, almost grudgingly.

"Kaname-san! Please come here?" Mami calls to her with a smile.

Madoka stands, stretching briefly before making her way over.

No doubt they have seen how bored she is and they're going to suggest for her to go home.

When she is close enough Mami is still smiling and Homura is looking at everywhere but her.

"Uhm, yes, Mami-san?"

"I was wondering if you've given it any thought?"

Madoka blinks, face completely bewildered. "U-Uhm. About what, Mami-san?"

Undeterred, Mami casts a look of disapproval to Homura. "Akemi-san didn't mention this to you yesterday? She left early so that she could catch you before you went to sleep."

At this, Madoka's eyes widen and she snaps her head towards Homura who is now staring at the floor, ears flat and tail flickering nervously.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka's voice has her flinching and she peers at Madoka with her head still bowed. "You came home very late yesterday..."

Homura nods, fidgeting with her sleeves.

"You told me you were collecting grief seeds..."

Homura nods again.

"Were you...?"

Homura ducks her head.

"Homura-chan...?"

She pauses and shakes her head.

"What were you doing?"

Ears twitch.

"Homura-chan?"

"...I was getting supplies," she answers truthfully.

Madoka stares at her, eyes narrowing. If Homura had to lie about it, it meant that wherever she had gone to had to be dangerous enough that she didn't want either of them knowing. She shares a look with Mami who decides to play peacemaker and steps in.

She clears her throat. "Well, yesterday during our patrol, Akemi-san and I were discussing things and one thing lead to another and well, I pointed out to her that as long as you continue to associate with us, there's always the potential of you getting caught in a less than ideal situation... And there may be times," her eyes flicker to Homura as if to stop her protests, "where one of us may not be there to immediately help you." Thoughts of her stained white dress flashes in her mind. "So, although this is rather unconventional, we decided that perhaps it would be best if you were to learn how to at least defend yourself if the situation were to ever occur."

Madoka stares, trying to process Mami's words.

"What do you say, Kaname-san? Do you want to learn?" she gestures to the musket in her hands.

Her eyes widen and the implications dawn on her.

Mami wanted her to learn how to *fight*.

Madoka... could learn how to become stronger even without becoming a magical girl.

Just as she's about to agree, a quiet voice interrupts them.

"W-Wait..." Homura tells them and when both pairs of eyes turn to her she flinches slightly before straightening out. "I have something better for Madoka to use..."

She slips her gun back into her shield and reaches for something else. Madoka is expecting a smaller handgun or something similar but what Homura pulls out, however, is entirely something else.

Madoka blinks while Mami stares at it in surprise.

It's a plain wooden recurve bow and Madoka feels something trigger in the back of her mind at the familiar shape.

"It's... Tomoe Mami, do you think you can enchant this?" Homura asks as she holds it out. She would do it herself but she knows that Mami has a lot more control than her, especially in this timeline and Mami nods as she accepts it.

"Hmm... let me see." Mami examines it, testing the weight and trying to determine what she can add to make the bow stronger. She already has an image in her mind—

—a wooden bow with three prongs at one end... a pink flower—

—and casts her magic on the weapon.

It glows yellow, like her own magical signature, and when the spell is done, Homura sucks in a deep breath while Madoka stares.

Mami nods, looking at it proudly before handing it back to Homura. "Here you go, Akemi-san. There's no need for arrows—it's attached directly to my magic and pulling the string should summon a small amount of magic, similar to how my muskets work."

Homura stares at the bow and her hand trembles lightly as she accepts it.

It looks exactly like the one Madoka uses whenever she's a magical girl. The only difference is that the flower on top is yellow rather than pink and that at least comforts her somehow.

She still has to fight back the memories though and swallows heavily. "T-Thank you," she whispers quietly. She repeats Mami's words in her mind and turns to the blonde. "Your muskets are single-shot..."

Mami nods. "Yes, but that is my own preference. Each time I make them I can also vary the power for each shot. The arrows are unlimited, as long as I am in range to provide the magic. The flower is a conductor of sorts."

They both know how unexplainable magic can be and Homura can just imagine how intricately Mami has woven her magic into the bow.

Homura stares at the flower, trying to remind herself that it's not the same, before she nods. "I see... Will it take a lot of magic to maintain?"

Here, Mami smiles and shakes her head. "Not at all."

"I see..." Homura closes her eyes to calm her inner demons and when she opens them, her eyes are clear and focused.

Even after so many failed repeats, she still remembers the lessons that Madoka had once given her.

She moves her right leg back for more balance and holds the grip tightly with her left hand, pulling the string behind her with her right. Sensing the drawback, she can feel Mami's magic gather and after a quick glance for confirmation of a yellow arrow made of light, her fingers release the string and they watch as the yellow light pierces straight through one of the targets they had set up before scattering into magical dust.

Madoka feels a familiarity brimming within her chest and for some reason she feels really eager to hold the bow in her hands.

"Unfortunately, the arrows will have a set amount of magic since it's easier to just have it draw out the same amount every time," Mami murmurs as she taps her chin thoughtfully, talking more to herself than to Homura or Madoka. "Which means it'll be less effective from further distances but it is better than nothing."

Madoka ignores her as she looks to Homura expectantly. She hesitates but places it in her open palm and watches as Madoka runs her hand along the grip, eyes suddenly distant.

—keepitasecretfromeveryoneinourclass,okay?—

She suddenly turns to face one of the further targets and her body moves almost instinctively as she copies Homura's earlier stance. When the arrow is released, it flies straight and true and all three stare as it connects with its intended target before it shatters into yellow specks.

Mami is pleasantly surprised. "It appears your choice was correct, Akemi-san. Have you taken archery lessons before, Kaname-san?"

Madoka blinks, as if suddenly drawn back from somewhere and she shakes her head. "N-No... never." She stares at the weapon in her hands in wonder.

"Then you must be a natural," Mami tells her with a nod. "Well, originally we were going to have you learn how to use a gun... but this works out even better. Having you at least with a weapon will provide you with some sort of protection."

Madoka nods.

"Uhm," she turns to Mami. "Can I try that again? I-I mean, your magic," she gestures to the bow and Mami smiles at her.

"Do not worry about that, Kaname-san. Each arrow takes even less than my muskets since I don't need to make a new one with each shot. You could practice for hours and it would barely drain anything."

Even Homura seems surprised at this tidbit of information and Mami winks at her.

"We all have different strengths in different places, Akemi-san. I could even do the same to one of your guns."

Homura opens her mouth to reply, but suddenly her eyes cut across to the opening of the lot and Madoka turns around to see Sayaka enter.

Her childhood friend waves at her but stops as soon as she notices the bow in Madoka's hands.

"Ahh..." is all Madoka can say as Sayaka suddenly sprints towards her.

"Madoka! Why are you—!"

"Sayaka-chan! I can expla—"

"This is all your fault!" Sayaka quickly changes gears and tackles Homura who makes no effort to dodge and they slide onto the floor in a cloud of dust.

"Sayaka-chan!"

"Miki-san!

Homura lays on the ground, unaffected as Sayaka kneels over her, fist raised and eyes angry.

"You're supposed to protect her! How could you even let Kyuubey close to her?! What the hell did you do to make her desperate enough to wish—"

Yellow ribbons suddenly surround her and she's pulled away.

Sayaka growls and struggles to break free.

"Homura-chan! Are you alright?" the smaller girl rushes to Homura's side who merely sits up and dusts off her clothes.

"Yes, I am fine Madoka."

Madoka helps her to her feet and gives Sayaka a disapproving look that's ignored; the tomboy is still struggling with Mami's ribbons.

"Please, Miki-san, calm down and take a closer look," Mami tells her and Sayaka turns angry eyes to Madoka, instantly glaring at the bow in her hands. "Her clothes," Mami points out and Sayaka knows—is expecting—a pink and white frilly dress—but all she sees is Madoka wearing a light pink hoodie, black shorts and her usual white socks and a pair of sneakers.

For a magical outfit, it's definitely the most casual she has ever seen and she blinks in confusion.

Madoka holds the bow out so that Sayaka can see it. "I-It's enchanted, with Mami-san's magic," she explains.

Mami nods and points her finger at it, drawing her magic back and Sayaka finds herself staring at a very plain wooden bow.

"Oh…"

"Have you calmed down now, Miki-san?" Mami asks and Sayaka nods, obviously embarrassed. The fact that Kyouko has now joined them and is giving her a look has her cheeks slightly aflame.

The ribbons disappear and she manages to land on her feet.

"Now, don't you have something to say to Akemi-san?"

Homura stares blankly at Sayaka who lets out a long suffering sigh.

"Sorry, transfer student."

Homura flicks her hair behind her, ears twitching lightly.

Sayaka shakes her head and suddenly she crosses her arms across her chest, turning to Madoka. "What are you doing with that anyways?"

"I'm learning how to protect myself," Madoka tells her, lifting her chin almost rebelliously.

"...Why?" there's something akin to betrayal in Sayaka's voice and she deliberately glares at Homura before turning back to Madoka. "You...you're not even a magical girl. You should leave this kind of stuff to us..." she realizes she's sounding like Homura and quickly amends her words. "It's only going to be more dangerous the more you hang out with us and if you feel that you need to learn how to protect yourself, I think maybe you should stay home. You have... you have your family to think of, Madoka."

Madoka grips the plain bow in her hands and shakes her head.

"...You know I can't do that, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka can suddenly understand why Homura always seemed to dismiss Madoka with her harsh words; the girl is stubborn and unwilling to listen. She doesn't like being lumped together with Homura, however, and whirls around, pointing an accusing finger at the dark haired girl. "This is your fault! You probably suggested it to her! If you didn't—"

Mami clears her throat. "Actually, it was my suggestion, Miki-san."

Sayaka stops short. "W-What?"

"Considering the situation, it is more practical than forcing Kaname-san to stay away from us. She is your best friend and Akemi-san is... well, you know." Homura blinks at this but Mami continues. "The more we push her away, the more she will try and help and eventually she will find herself in a precarious situation where she will be helpless and just maybe, she will need to make a wish to survive."

Homura tenses and Madoka places a hand on her back to comfort her.

"It is all hypothetical, of course," Mami says as she glances to Homura briefly, "but considering the existence of witches, it may one day happen. And you know Kaname-san more than I do, Miki-san. Does she seem like someone who will obediently stay home as her friends are out there risking their lives every day?"

This is what had convinced Homura to agree. She moves closer to Madoka as if seeking reassurance and presses her face against her neck. The action makes Madoka stiffen considerably and Homura immediately tries to pull away but hands are around her waist, holding her in place.

"It's okay, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs into her ear. It had caught her off-guard but her neck is healed and Homura's ears are soft and she pushes down thoughts of —*handsaroundherneck*— and grips Homura tighter, trying to calm down her panic; she forgives her and there's no way she's going to allow herself to be afraid of Homura.

Sayaka notices their exchange, eyes narrowing at their closeness before she turns back to Mami who is still waiting for her reply.

Though she wants to deny it, she knows Mami's words ring true. She knows Madoka and Madoka and her selflessness will be her downfall one day and she can easily picture her running to save someone from something and taking the hit instead.

It has Sayaka shuddering and she sighs.

She doesn't answer but Mami knows that she's on board as well.

"Good," she nods. "Now that that has been taken care of and everyone is finally here, perhaps we can start this training session. Akemi-san?"

Eyes turn to her and she brushes her ears against Madoka's cheek one last time before stepping away—or tries to but Madoka keeps a firm hold around her waist and she settles for standing next to her.

She coughs lightly, ears twitching and cheeks blushing before she nods to the others. "The reason for this training session is to enable us to learn how to work together and build our teamwork. While most of us are strong individually," Sayaka growls here because she knows Homura is not including her in that comment, "none of us have the experience of really working together, especially not all four of us together at once."

Kyouko crunches her pocky loudly after having been surprisingly quiet so far. "So you want us to work together? Shouldn't we just go poke some witches then?"

Sayaka nods. That sounded like the best way to do it.

Homura shakes her head. "As we are now, we will merely get in each other's way if we all fight together." That's what happened with every timeline when they tried. "We hardly know each other's style and all of us are used to fighting by ourselves. It's why I insisted we split up into pairs yesterday instead of having all four us together. While it's true Tomoe Mami and I have been patrolling together, we are both ranged fighters. If Miki Sayaka were to join us, she would most likely end up running into a stray bullet." Or bomb. "And," she addresses Kyouko, "though you and Tomoe Mami have worked together before, how long has it been since then? Can you safely say that you trust her to watch your back and that you will be able to predict her shots?"

Homura's words drive a very convincing point and Kyouko sighs.

"Alright, so it's true, I'd rather fight one on one. Which was kind of like how it was being partnered with bluey yesterday," Kyouko tells Sayaka, smirking at her scowl, before turning back to Homura. "So how the hell are we going to learn to work together?"

Homura nods. "I propose that we start with simple team building exercises. If we can learn to trust each other, everything else will slowly fall into place."

The previous timeline had proven that trust played a very important part for them to be able to fight together. Although, their animal instincts had immensely helped with that. After all, their heightened senses enabled them to dodge stray attacks easier... But that would be impossible to mimic here and the best solution would be for them to build a strong level of understanding and trust, which she hopes these exercises will accomplish.

"Of course we will also be patrolling as well, though I believe we should continue pairing off so that Miki Sayaka can learn from Sakura Kyouko for a while longer before we start switching partners, eventually grouping together once we're more comfortable with each other's fighting styles. Unfortunately, there's not much time before Walpurgisnacht, but I think as long as we continue to do these team building exercises as well as our patrols, we will be able to learn how to work together by the time she arrives."

"U-Uhm, Homura-chan?" Madoka turns to her.

"Yes, Madoka?"

"Am I included in all this?"

Homura pauses and though she wants to tell her no, she nods after a moment. The exercises are simple and Mami had a very good point: the more they pushed Madoka away, the more she would fight back and her continual helplessness at the situation is always the catalyst to her making a contract.

The previous timeline had been an exception but *that* had been a very special case and there's nothing like that in this timeline for Madoka...

Maybe if they had let her join them earlier, some other timeline could've been *the one* but Homura knows she hasn't been thinking clearly for a while now and somehow the Mami from this timeline has suddenly become a very reliable senpai once more and her suggestion for Madoka had felt like a curve ball thrown out from nowhere.

There are also other factors only found in this timeline and—she realizes she's getting distracted when she feels Madoka tighten her hands around her waist and she quickly pulls away from her thoughts and turns back to face the others. She's at least relieved to find she had only zoned out for a brief moment.

"Alright, so what kind of 'team building exercises' are we going to do anyways?" Kyouko asks as she starts on another stick of pocky. She's wondering just why she's still here doing these stupid things with these people and chalks it up to boredom.

Maybe.

Homura nods, reaching into her shield to pull out some papers. "I did some research and I found some exercises that are used in companies to help train and build stronger teams."

"Eh?" Kyouko scratches her head in confusion.

Homura turns to her. "I have a whole list to go through but the first one seems simple. Have you ever heard of a 'trust fall?'"

\\

As it turns out, Homura's assessment of their teamwork had been spot on; that is, all of them are horrible at it except Madoka and Mami.

Sayaka is too stubborn to catch Homura or Kyouko and Kyouko likes watching their reactions when she deliberately misses the catch.

And Homura?

Homura is the worst out of them all.

She can't even get past closing her eyes and can't get herself to catch anyone that isn't Madoka.

"Perhaps... we should take a break?" Mami suggests as she stares at the other girls who are displaying varying degrees of irritation from their continuous falls.

Madoka pets Homura in comfort and nods to Mami.

"I think that sounds good, Mami-san."

"Sounds great to me. I'm starving," Kyouko says as she stands, dusting off her jacket. This has to be why she has stayed: the aspect of free food.

"Yeah," Sayaka grumbles as she gets to her feet, likewise patting down her shorts and shirt.

Mami smiles. "There is this new restaurant that I've been wanting to try. Does anyone mind if we go there?"

"Nope," Kyouko immediately replies.

Sayaka shakes her head and Mami turns to Madoka and Homura.

"We don't mind either," Madoka answers for the both of them, knowing that Homura will agree to anywhere that she wants to go to.

Mami claps once in delight. "Splendid."

\\

Even though it's a Sunday and there's a grand opening special, they arrive at the restaurant during off-peak hours and are seated within 15 minutes. As they walk to their seats, they take in the interior and find it very sleek and modern. There are white booths lining the walls with enough room for walking and 4-seat tables in the middle that can be combined for larger parties. The walls are filled with screens that change backgrounds every few minutes and the floor is patterned with white and grey lines that invert colours after a set amount of time passes.

Overall, it seems like a place that will become a popular hangout considering its location and the amount of people still inside despite it being well over lunch time.

They're lead to a booth and Kyouko shares a seat with Sayaka, albeit grudgingly. On the other side, Homura, Madoka, and Mami squeeze in together and they start browsing through their individual digital menus.

"I'm not paying for you," Sayaka immediately tells Kyouko as she scrolls down the drink list.

Before Kyouko can reply, Mami smiles to them. "It was my suggestion to come here, I will pay for us all."

Sayaka and Madoka immediately protest while Kyouko eagerly starts searching for things she wants to eat.

"Eh? You don't need to do that Mami-san!" Madoka waves her hands animatedly.

"Yeah! We can pay for ourselves!"

Homura ignores them, thumbing through all the pages.

"No need to worry. I don't mind treating my cute kouhai once in a while," Mami replies with a wink. "Now, now," she stops their complaints. "Please decide on what you would like."

Sayaka and Madoka share a look, promises of making sure to take the bill away from Mami exchanged through their eyes and they turn back to their menus.

As Madoka stares at the selection, she finds herself unable to decide. It hasn't been that long since lunch but the pasta is already burning away and she feels that she'll be hungry soon enough.

"Homura-chan?" she turns to the other girl who is still browsing through aimlessly.

"Yes, Madoka?" she stops and stares at Madoka in question.

"Do you know what you want to get...?"

Homura shakes her head. "No..." she pauses. "Well... s-some type of meat...?"

Madoka slides her screen over to the entree section and her eyes take in the selection of available dishes. "Steak then? Or maybe a chicken dish? The list is huge..."

Homura nods. "But..."

"Hm?" she glances at Homura curiously.

"D-Do you think... any of the meat here is crunchy...?"

Madoka blinks at her in confusion. "Crunch—" she pales suddenly. "Homura-chan!"

The other three look up at Madoka's raised voice but she ignores them.

"I think a steak dish would be good, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her with a strained smile.

Homura stares at her and looks back at the menu.

"You can order medium rare, if you'd like."

Homura's brow furrows slightly but her eyes light up suddenly and Madoka sighs in exasperation.

"NO*, not* rare." She doesn't want her to get used to eating barely cooked meat.

Homura seems to deflate at that. "...Okay..."

Sayaka blinks, Kyouko ignores them and turns back to the menu and Mami smiles to herself in amusement.

\\

"Alright, now that we have taken a break, I think perhaps I was too hasty to try an exercise that is obviously something that is at a higher level than we are currently capable of..." Homura tells them as they are once again gathered in the abandoned lot. She looks around, evaluating their relaxed faces and knows since they just ate, something too physical wouldn't be a good idea. She licks her lips, wondering how a rare steak would've tasted but quickly shakes her head when she catches Madoka's eye.

She clears her throat nervously. "We'll try another exercise... this is supposed to help with communication..."

She summons her shield and pulls out five different coloured sketchbooks. Madoka can't help but grin when she notices they're colour coded: pink, blue, yellow, purple, and red.

Homura hands them out to each respective girl along with a black marker.

"This is similar to a game called 'telephone...?'" she tilts her head, ears twitching, showing her confusion at that but continues to read the instructions, "except it is done with drawings. One person will start, drawing something simple enough that other people should be able to identify. Then, they show their picture to the next person who will try and copy the drawing and this repeats until it reaches the last person who will then try and answer what the drawing is of. There will be a time limit for each artist,

between 10-20 seconds... 10 should be enough," she mumbles to herself. "Are there any questions?"

Everyone shakes their head; the instructions are easy to understand.

"Remember that when it is not your turn you aren't supposed to be peeking," Homura reminds them and deliberately shoots Kyouko a glance.

Kyouko looks offended but when Mami gives her the same look she grumbles. "Yeah, yeah..."

She's only still here because Mami had paid for lunch and lunch had been delicious.

"We will all take turns on who will start. Madoka, you will go first."

"Ah," Madoka points to herself and Homura nods.

She looks around, seeing if anyone else minded and they all stare at her, waiting for her to begin. For some reason when she glances over to Sayaka and Kyouko, she has a feeling that this will not end well.

Pushing those negative thoughts aside, Madoka nods, signaling she's ready and turns her sketchbook away from the others as Homura pulls out a stopwatch from her shield.

"You may begin in 3...2...1." She hits the the switch and Madoka uncaps her marker to draw.

She chooses something easy—a cat—though she knows Sayaka will probably tease her about that but it's all she can think of and she manages to draw a really cute one in her allotted time.

"Time."

Madoka quickly turns her sketchbook over so that Mami can see.

"Go."

Mami nods and her marker moves quickly as she tries to copy Madoka's drawing as best as she can.

"Time."

She barely manages to fit the body in, forgoing the tail and gives Madoka an apologetic look.

"Go."

Mami flips her drawing over to Homura who stares at it, immediately knowing what is it. She is used to moving much slower however, and spends too much time on the head and the cat's body is only half complete as she instinctively knows that her time is up.

"Time," she mutters, almost angrily at herself before she turns to Kyouko and holds out her drawing.

"What—"

"Go."

"What the hell is..." Kyouko growls as the marker squeaks from the pressure of her hand. "Stupid...this..."

"Time."

She sighs and shows Sayaka her final product.

"..." Sayaka blankly stares at the mess on Kyouko's paper. "How am I—what is—are you kidding me?"

"Miki Sayaka, what is the drawing?" Homura asks her calmly. There is no time limit for guessing but she doesn't think it should take that long.

"Uh..." Sayaka glances to Kyouko's picture before looking at Madoka. "...Spider?"

Homura blinks and grabs Kyouko's sketchbook so that she can see the drawing.

"...Yes, that is a spider," Homura agrees as Mami and Madoka crowd around closer so they can also see.

"Like yours was any better!" Kyouko declares as she grabs Homura's sketchbook and flips it around.

"The ears are visible," Homura replies as she uses her marker to point to the sharp lines of the head. "Your head is completely round."

Mami and Madoka present theirs and those two are at least very close.

Homura clears her throat. "Well, it was our first try. Now that we know what to expect I'm sure our efforts will improve."

Madoka and Mami share a glance.

This definitely will not end well.

\\

"Bucket."

Mami stares at Homura and gestures to the other girls to show their drawings and they can see that the quality had deteriorated in between Sayaka and Kyouko. She sighs.

"It was a teacup."

/

"How the hell are we supposed to know what that is!?" Kyouko yells loudly.

"It is a very common familiar," Homura points out. "The mustache is very distinctive..."

"Homura-chan... It's supposed to be something simple enough that everyone knows it."

Homura flicks her hair behind her, frowning slightly. "...How am I supposed to know no one here pays attention to the familiars..."

\\

"It's a dog! Obviously! Madoka had a cat, so I drew a dog!" Sayaka tells them angrily.

"Those ears are not a dog's ears," Homura comments and Kyouko nods in agreement.

"Yeah, those are cat ears."

"Dogs can have the same ears!"

"Why would you use the same ears as a cat?" Homura questions her, pointing to her own ears. "There are dogs with floppy ears, those are easier to identify."

"Grrrr!"

/

"Are you kidding me?" Kyouko throws her sketchbook to the ground. "It's a slice of cake! Hello! Mami and her cakes?"

Homura shakes her head. "Your triangle should've been more like an isosceles but you drew it like a scalene."

"Yeah! You started off the drawing, couldn't you have used a little bit more effort?" Sayaka agrees as Kyouko glares at her.

"Shut up! I bet you don't even know what she's talking about!"

"What? O-Of course I do!"

"Then what's an isosceles and what's a scalene?" Kyouko demands.

Sayaka raises her chin. "Ha. Madoka!"

The smaller girl looks startled. "E-Eh?"

"Explain to Kyouko what isosceles and scalene means."

"Uhm," she glances between Kyouko and Sayaka before answering. "An isosceles triangle has two equal sides and two equal angles while a scalene triangle has uneven sides and angles..."

Sayaka smirks at Kyouko. "See? I knew that."

Kyouko scoffs. "Maybe I should scalene your-"

"Ahem," Mami clears her throat. "Akemi-san?" she turns to Homura who is still frowning at Kyouko's drawing. "Perhaps... we should try a different exercise?"

Homura nods and collects the supplies before slipping them back into her shield. She stares at her list, tail flickering behind her as she flips the page.

"Oh, this seemed interesting..." she nods to herself. "This is also another exercise to help with communication. This can be done in pairs or up to four or five people. There will be one 'leader' while the others will be blindfolded. Then, the leader has to lead their group through a field maze to get from point A to point B, while at the same time making sure to avoid 'landmines.'"

"Well... that sounds simple..." Mami says as the others agree.

Homura nods and pulls out a round metal object from her shield. "I'll be done setting up in a moment."

"W-Wait, Homura-chan..." Madoka doesn't know what landmines look like but she does know Homura. "T-That's not... what I think it is... is it?"

Homura blinks and tilts her head, ears twitching. "The exercise is called 'landmine?' Aren't we supposed to use real ones?"

"N-No," Madoka stammers out as she places a hand on Homura's arm. "P-Put that away, please."

"But—"

"Homura-chan..."

"...Alright. But without them, the exercise doesn't seem as effective...?"

"Akemi-san?" Mami gives her a nervous smile. "Perhaps, something easier will be a better choice...?"

Sayaka and Kyouko share a look.

"Kitty cat's a bit loony eh?"

Sayaka actually grins at her. "Hey, what do you know. Maybe these team building exercises do work. I think we just found something we both agree o**n."**

AN: *throws ff's document editor into a fire* how dare you log me out when I try to save my edits. grr..

I do like socially awkward Homura more than cold hearted Homura. And Cat Homura is at the top of the list *pinches her cheeks* Somehow this became the longest chapter so far. Hope the dialogue is amusing and made up for some of the sadness from the previous chapter and beginning of this chapter. As always, thanks for reading, reviewing, especially to those two(you know who you areeee) who consistently leave reviews. Hm, yeah not much else to say, except oops, Sayaka's confession was definitely not addressed in this chapter. But maybe next, but most likely the one after.

Chapter 14: bonds

As Madoka pulls the string back, the automatic draw of magic no longer surprises her and she thinks that there's something familiar about *this* that calms her, giving her a sense of reassurance. Gripping the wooden bow in her hands, she finds the feeling almost nostalgic and for some unexplainable reason, it fills her with confidence that she knows she normally lacks.

She can hear Sayaka teasing Homura, Kyouko laughing at Mami. A glance over her shoulder and the sight of the four of them getting along warms her heart. If they can learn to work together, they can defeat Walpurgisnacht.

And she can help them.

She exhales slowly, right before her fingers release and she watches as the yellow — *pink*— arrow flies straight into the target.

No. They will definitely defeat Walpurgisnacht.

For some reason, her mind latches onto this thought almost desperately.

Because something tells her that somehow, everything will finally really begin when that story finally ends.

\

Sayaka tilts her body forward, easily pulling Homura with her as they stretch out their backs.

A few more failed attempts at other various exercises and they're now doing simple stretches like those during gym at school. Due to their uneven group number, Madoka had volunteered to sit this one out to practice more with her enchanted bow and had suggested for Sayaka to pair with Homura, leaving Mami with Kyouko.

Though fairly reluctant, they had grudgingly agreed and leg stretches are finished and they have moved onto the next set. Each pair is now standing back to back to their partner, arms hooked at the elbows as one person leans forward, the other one relaxing and lying over their partner's back before switching positions.

"Sheesh, transfer student. How much do you weigh?" Sayaka asks her, barely even feeling the weight of the other girl on her. She isn't even doing anything special with her magic. "You might weigh less than Madoka."

"Switch," Homura merely says and Sayaka lowers her to ground. They can hear Kyouko mentioning something about cakes and Mami's weight and then silence and Sayaka shakes her head at the other girl's tactlessness, overlooking her own comment to Homura.

Homura mimics Sayaka's earlier actions, planting her feet firmly into the ground to support the added weight. She finds Sayaka is heavier than she had assumed but she doesn't want to use magic for something as simple as this.

"Hmm? Am I too heavy for the little transfer student?" Sayaka grins and she can feel Homura stiffen.

"Maybe if you ate less..." she replies quietly.

"I'm at a pretty healthy weight though," Sayaka tells her, not at all embarrassed and she deliberately lifts her own legs up, making Homura bear more of her weight. "Maybe

if you ate more you'd grow and get stronger. I tell that to Madoka all the time but for her I think it's in her genes."

"Switch," Homura tells her, lowering her to the ground.

Sayaka smirks, quickly pitching forward and lifting the other girl onto her back.

It catches Homura by surprise and her eyes widen. "W-What are you—"

"Seriously, you weigh like nothing," Sayaka tells her and before Homura can react, she demonstrates by running in a giant circle.

"M-Miki S-Sayaka—stop—it." Homura lifts her legs slightly to avoid the tips of her shoes dragging on the floor as each step bounces her uncomfortably on Sayaka's back. She struggles against the other girl's hold. "Switch. Switch!"

Sayaka returns to their earlier location before stopping, breathing only a little harder and straightens up to gently lower Homura to the ground.

"Why are you so difficult," Homura mutters. There's one more set though and she bends forward to finish this properly.

Sayaka lifts her legs again, higher this time. "I think you just need to loosen up."

Homura stands up abruptly while untangling their arms and Sayaka is thrown off her back, barely avoiding falling onto her wrist due to her quick reflexes.

"Hey!"

There's a low hiss from Homura and Sayaka blinks, glancing over to her and she can see her ears and tail have reappeared and are standing up in obvious irritation. Her shield is summoned and Sayaka feels her blood run cold as she watches her pull out a gun.

"H-Hey, no problems here, transfer student," Sayaka holds out her hands in surrender but Homura ignores her, turning around and pointing the gun towards the entrance of the lot.

"What's wrong, Akemi-san?"

Mami and Kyouko have noticed her sudden change of attitude and they follow her line of sight.

Mami gasps lightly.

Kyuubey.

/So this is where you girls are/

His voice makes Madoka jump, causing her to accidentally release the arrow gathered in her hand too early. She looks around in alarm, not bothering to watch as it completely misses the target and finally spots the familiar white fur and red eyes.

Homura is besides her a second later and the other girls move to join them.

"Why are you here," Homura asks, voice cold as the gun remains locked on Kyuubey's head, eyes watching as he steps closer before stopping a short distance away.

/Very impressive, Akemi Homura. To deliberately hide in an older district, making it harder for me to detect you all. I assume this is no mere coincidence/

There is no reply as she grits her teeth angrily. It's taking all her will power not to fill Kyuubey with holes but she knows that killing Kyuubey at point blank range can still cause some lingering side effects even though they have already agreed to not associate with him.

"What is he talking about?" Sayaka glances at her curiously.

Homura merely hisses and Madoka immediately tries to placate her with a hand on her back.

Kyuubey turns to Sayaka. /I am usually able to locate your magical signatures throughout the city as my range extends to the entire radius. However, when you enter certain sections that are filled with a large amount of 'old magic,' it tends to limit my sensors as your own signatures are overpowered by 'fake' barriers. Fortunately, this city doesn't have too many of those, effectively narrowing my search, though the need to physically move closer in order to detect you did make it take quite a while to figure out you were all here. Did someone give you this information, Akemi Homura? I am sure I have never mentioned this to you/

"What does it even matter," Kyouko tells him, tempted to summon her own spear to skewer him but instead settles for rummaging in her pockets for something to munch on. "Why are you here? We don't need you anymore. You aren't getting any grief seeds from us."

/Yes, that in itself is very inconvenient. I must insist you girls hand them back to me. A grief seed may hatch into a witch once more and—/

Homura fires a shot, grazing his ear and levels him with a cold glare. "Why are you here," she repeats.

/I am merely here to observe. It is unfortunate that you were so easily swayed, Kyouko. It seems I underestimated your powers of persuasion, Akemi Homura/

Kyouko angrily takes a bite of her pocky and the almost empty box does little to help her mood.

"Are you kidding me?" she growls at him. "Anyone would take her side once they knew the truth!"

/On the contrary, it's easier for one to deny the truth than to accept it. I don't know how Akemi Homura made you believe her, but opinions on these kinds of matters usually don't change so easily/

"What are you even here for?" Sayaka demands, stomping her foot angrily.

/I told you, I am here merely to observe/ His red eyes zero in on Homura. /Your physical manifestations really are curious, Akemi Homura. But seeing how easily you swayed Kyouko, I think I may have a higher understanding to the obvious advantage it gives you/

"What are you talking about..." Homura stares at him, ears twitching and tail flickering in irritation.

/It is obvious that they are more for decoration than anything. Physical manifestations that mimic animals. I would say that you are similar to us in that regard, Akemi Homura/

His words sends chills down her spine.

/A softer appearance used to sway minds. Young girls tend to trust things with innocent faces, do they not?/ his eyes glint at the implications but before Homura can even think of pulling the trigger, a yellow light pierces through his skull and he collapses, limp, onto the floor.

Homura's eyes widen and she quickly turns to face Mami.

But, Mami is staring in shock at the now dead Kyuubey and no one else is more surprised than Homura when she sees Madoka lowering her bow.

"M-Madoka...?"

The smaller girl's usual smiling face is nowhere to be found and her eyes are angry; she has figured out the source of her anger.

"Homura-chan is nothing like you," Madoka states quietly, voice remnant of this morning and Homura shudders at the tone. "Don't you *dare* compare her to you."

Another Kyuubey reappears.

"K-Kyuubey...?" Mami collapses onto her knees, eyes darting back and forth between the duplicates.

"He's...how?" Kyouko shakes her head in obvious confusion before her face twists in disgust when she sees Kyuubey eating his dead body.

"He cannot die," Homura answers them, attention split between Madoka and Kyuubey. "He has an infinite amount of bodies that are replaceable at a moment's notice."

With a disgusting swallow, Kyuubey is finished and sits as his tail swishes from side to side.

"...You're a coward," Sayaka declares suddenly. "Y-You can die as many times as you want... No wonder you can easily turn us into zombies without feeling anything... you...you can't even understand pain...let alone death..."

/I agree. You humans are hard to understand. The emotions you feel, things like—/

Driven by impulse, Kyouko follows through with her earlier thought and holds out the newly skewered Kyuubey. "...Not as satisfying as I thought it would be," she comments as she eyes the new Kyuubey already walking around. Her spear disappears into her soul gem and Kyuubey's body drops to the ground with a soft thud.

/Putting those things aside... Kaname Madoka. Your potential shows itself clearly with you just utilizing magical weapons even without making a contract. Think of how powerful you could be as a magical—/

Time resumes and everyone jumps when Kyuubey is riddled with holes.

/You humans and your pointless actions. What do you plan to accomplish by doing these things?/

Homura merely pulls out another loaded gun and points it at him. "Chasing after you could be our new exercise. This is your last chance. Why are you here?"

His eyes remain emotionless as he shakes his head. /I am assuming the four of you have banded together in the hopes that it will be enough to defeat Walpurgisnacht. I am curious how you found about her arrival, Akemi Homura/

"Leave," she grounds out as her ears twitch angrily.

/I will tell you now. It is a futile attempt; without Kaname Madoka the four of you will—/

This time no one reacts as he drops to the floor, Homura's gun still smoking.

"We can continue this endless cycle," Homura states as he appears once more. "Or you can leave and stop wasting our time."

He finishes his disposal of his body and stares at them blankly. /Very well/

Homura doesn't relax and grits her teeth, eyes following him as he bounds away.

/I look forward to seeing what kind of witches you girls will become. The universe thanks you for your contribution/

Finally, he's gone but the damage has already been done.

There's a clatter as the bow drops from Madoka's hands. The adrenaline leaves her body, her anger drains away and the impact of her actions hits her like a tidal wave.

She had killed—

She falls to her knees, breaths panicked and Sayaka and Homura immediately attend to her.

"Madoka. Are you alright?" Homura wants to comfort her but her hands hover, unsure, as Kyuubey's earlier words echo in her mind and she can't bring herself to reach closer to actually touch her.

"Of course she's not alright!" Sayaka growls out and she does what Homura cannot do.

"S-Sayaka-chan... I..."

"It's okay, Madoka," Sayaka hugs her close. "It's okay."

Kyouko breaks her last stick of pocky in half, angrily stuffing both pieces into her mouth and casts a look around. Her gaze stops at Mami who is still sitting on the floor, staring blankly ahead.

"Mami? Oy Mami?"

The blonde snaps her head up, blinking slowly. "Ah... Y-Yes, Sakura-san?"

"You alright there?"

"Yes... of course..."

Kyouko knows that Mami is anything but. She knows more than anyone just how much Mami had depended on Kyuubey and can already assume she's drowning in thoughts of regret and betrayal. She turns to Homura, seeking guidance but finds her staring at Madoka and Sayaka, ears flat and looking as lost as she feels.

"Kitty Cat."

Her sharp voice has Homura looking up at her.

"You got any exercises involving something more physical?"

She tilts her head in question.

"Something..." Kyouko holds out her hands, itching for something sweet but she's all out now and she settles for closing them into fists. "Something... I don't know. Something to get rid of all this stress."

Homura eyes her curiously. "We can start our patrols early...?"

Kyouko shakes her head. "Nah." She seems thoughtful. "Something all of us can do together. More physical. Less baby stuff like we have been doing. Less thinking, more hitting. Fighting..."

Homura's tail flickers as she considers her words and the others are now staring at them, curious at Kyouko's statement and Homura's contemplation.

Surely she isn't going to suggest them to fight each other...?

Wordlessly, Homura slips her gun back into her shield and pulls out her papers again but this time Kyouko reaches over and plucks it out of her grasp.

Homura blinks, automatically reaching for it but Kyouko holds out a hand to stop her, eyes already scanning Homura's very extensive and scarily thorough list.

Her eyes widen when she spots a familiar word and she glances over to Homura before cutting across to Mami and finally to Sayaka who's still holding a sniffling Madoka.

"This," Kyouko says, grinning, "seems perfect."

She holds out the paper, finger pointing to the exercise and Homura's ears flicker.

"I thought... you wanted to fight?'" she asks as she stares at the name.

"Don't you know," Kyouko tells her, holding out her arms, "the game of tag is a battle all in itself."

Without waiting for any of them to reply, she waves the papers in Homura's face who accepts them and suddenly Kyouko's transforming into her magical girl outfit.

"Magical girl tag... Hm." A dangerous smirk. "I'll go first. If I tag you, you're out." She slams her summoned spear down into the floor and everyone jumps at the cracks that appear.

Sayaka gulps nervously. "H-Hey... what are you—"

"You got ten seconds..."

Mami sits up straighter and shakes her head. "Sakura-san, it's—"

"10...9..."

Homura transforms and she's pulling Madoka to her feet. Earlier thoughts are discarded as she realizes the situation and the opportunity.

"Madoka. I will protect you," she tells her as she quickly scoops up the bow and hides it into her shield.

"8..7..6..."

"Uh..." Sayaka isn't sure what's happening but she follows Homura's example.

"5...4.."

Homura runs across the lot with Madoka following after her and Sayaka takes off after them.

"Sakura-san, wait, this is—"

"3..." Eyes lock with Mami, a challenge issued on her face.

"2..."

Mami flashes yellow and races to the opposite side.

"1!"

\\

As Madoka clutches onto Homura tightly, she's surprised to see how much the other girl actually seems to be enjoying this very dangerous game.

Once it had started, Kyouko had immediately raced towards the weakest link and Sayaka had been the first out. Her efforts at dodging and parrying Kyouko's attacks had been valiant but her obvious lack of experience had shown itself very clearly. The others had watched as Kyouko feinted and then suddenly her spear was wrapped around Sayaka, instantly dropping her to the floor. To add to the embarrassment, Kyouko had then placed her foot on the struggling girl, raising her fist in victory before turning her attention to the others.

Mami is now watching them, resting atop a pile of stacked cars after a very long clash of ribbons versus spear before Kyouko had suddenly veered off to chase after Homura who is using this exercise as a chance to work on her defense while protecting Madoka.

With her hands occupied as she carries Madoka in her arms, Homura can only dodge but with Kyouko making sure to at least hold back on the strength of her attacks, Homura's speed is enough and they seem to be at a standstill.

There's already an unsaid rule that Homura's time magic isn't allowed and that Kyouko cannot directly attack Madoka. They both know Homura will keep Madoka from being injured and what Kyouko's trying to do now is trap Homura in her spear to tag the both of them out.

Which is easier said than done.

Kyouko stops to catch her breath and Homura eyes her critically, muscles tense, waiting for signs of movement, a warning to an oncoming attack. Madoka is growing concerned with how rapid Homura's heartbeats are and how out of breath she seems.

"Damn," Kyouko breathes out, swiping at the sweat on her brow. "You're like a monkey, jumping all over the place. Hold still already so I can tag you!"

Homura doesn't reply, staring at her before she dashes away as Kyouko swings her spear at her. The chains on the spear handle disconnect and Homura twists her body to avoid the attack. Not to be out done, Kyouko pulls the chain back and the spear turns, barely missing her leg and there's a pause as Homura remembers something very important.

Suddenly all she knows is pain as the spear head cuts across her tail, almost severing it and she drops to the floor heavily, conscious enough to land on her back to at least make sure that Madoka is safe.

Her teeth grit, the pain overwhelming and Madoka is scrambling off her, eyes wide with concern.

"Homura-chan? Homura-chan!"

Her body spasms as she tries to concentrate on disconnecting the link between her body and soul gem. She starts clawing at her sternum desperately, eyes scrunched, low gasps of pain heard.

"Is she alright? What happened?" Mami is next to them in an instant, looking for signs of injury and Madoka shakes her head.

"I-I don't know!"

Sayaka rushes towards them, past the horrified Kyouko who is still staring at Homura who's now screaming in pain.

"Her tail! Kyouko hit her tail!" she yells at them.

"Help me hold her down!" Mami states, knowing she's not going to be able to avoid hurting Homura's tail even more with her ribbons considering how much she is thrashing. "Sakura-san! Please!"

Kyouko snaps out of it, immediately running over and the four of them struggle to flip her on her stomach, eventually succeeding before Sayaka holds down her arms and Kyouko grips her legs.

Homura's damaged tail flickers uncontrollably as she fights against them and Madoka all but sits on her to help press down her body.

Now with a clear view of Homura's tail, Mami uses her ribbons to pin it against Homura's body to stop it from moving and immediately locates the large gash that seems to be bleeding purple specks of light.

Homura's screams remind Mami of the situation and she quickly places her hand to the tail, concentrating on her magic to heal the mysterious wound, hoping that it'll take a lot easier than healing her body had.

To her surprise, her own magic fills in around the large opening before it's surrounded by purple, absorbed, and Homura's tail rebuilds itself and now has a spot of yellow where her wound used to be.

Mami pulls her hand away, testing if the magic will stay and is glad when she finds that it does.

Homura is quiet, no longer struggling as she takes in gulps of air and the ribbons disappear.

"Is she alright now?" Sayaka asks, hands still holding down her arms.

"I-I think so..." Madoka moves off Homura as everyone else lets her go. "Homura-chan?"

She remains lying there, ears flat and swiping at her eyes with her jacket sleeve. Madoka pulls out a handkerchief from her pocket, gently moving Homura's head into her lap to help wipe her face clean.

"Are you alright, Homura-chan?" Finished with her task, her hands automatically stroke her ears and instead of answering, Homura buries her face in Madoka's lap, legs curling in closer for more warmth.

The other three exchange nervous looks and Sayaka debates a moment before grabbing Kyouko's arm and pulling her up with her.

"Come on, let's go."

"Go? Where?" Kyouko echoes her as her eyes remain watching Homura.

"Get some snacks, drinks." Sayaka glances to Homura. "Milk."

Ears twitch at that and she sees Homura lift her head, lavender eyes peering at her.

"Strawberry milk," Sayaka clarifies and Homura already seems better as she nuzzles Madoka's leg with her cheek, ears twitching.

Madoka gives Sayaka a smile who rolls her eyes but there's obvious relief on her face.

"Come on," Sayaka repeats as she grabs Kyouko, pushing her towards the exit.

Mami watches as they leave and then turns to Homura, bowing her head.

"I'm sorry, Akemi-san, this was my fault," she admits, voice full of guilt. "Sakura-san was... for me...trying to provide a distraction. It's..."

Homura turns her body and she can see Mami looking as distraught as she sounds. She pauses before she uses her repaired tail to hit Mami's leg.

Mami blinks in confusion and Homura sits up, shaking her head to fix her hair before turning to look at her.

"She was trying to help all of us. And we had a choice to stop her," Homura tells her. "It was... rather enjoyable. Well, before that occurred..."

Madoka is reminded of what she had *done* and she reaches over to pull Homura close. "Is your tail okay now, Homura-chan?" she asks as she glances down to the flickering tail.

Homura nods, all hesitance now gone and makes herself more comfortable as she leans against Madoka for comfort. She stops her tail from moving and grabs it to examine it more closely. The gash that Mami has healed is visible, a jagged line of yellow on her otherwise black tail.

"The pain is usually not this bad," she murmurs as she pokes it, curious to how it differed from her own magic; she finds it doesn't feel any different at all.

"So it has happened before?" Mami asks her, feeling as Homura activates her magic, as if she's trying to heal it. Nothing happens and the yellow line remains as her own magic disperses into thin air.

"Yes..." Homura answers as she lets go of her tail, absently resuming its flickering from side to side. "Stray attacks from witches... projectiles... Those things are unpredictable." She stiffens as Madoka suddenly grabs her tail, wanting a closer look.

"Ah," she lets go immediately when she notices her reaction. "S-Sorry, Homura-chan..."

"Nn.. N-No, it's fine, Madoka." Homura shakes her head and places her tail in Madoka's open hand.

She is more gentle this time and holds it, eyes studying the yellow line. "It doesn't feel weird?" she murmurs as she runs her thumb across the line.

"No." Homura shivers lightly at her touch. "Not really..."

"Will it disappear when you hide your ears and tail?" the thought occurs to Mami and Homura shakes her head again.

"No, my ears and tail remain the same. They're permanently attached to my body but when I hide them it's similar to how we hide our soul gems into rings..."

Seeing no anomalies on Homura's tail, Madoka lets go. "You said this has happened before?"

"Yes."

"It's... it's not like a soul gem, is it?" Madoka asks her, paling. Damage to a soul gem would be—

"No," Homura reassures her. "They're... It's as if I've been enchanted, kind of like when Mami adds magic into your bow, except they're on my body. Permanent enchantments on my body..."

"So when Kyouko-chan cut it..."

"It wasn't physical damage I felt, but a different kind of damage..." She's not sure how to explain it and her head tilts in confusion.

"Is it related to your heart somehow?" Mami stares at her. "You were clutching your chest rather painfully."

Madoka is petting her again and Homura briefly enjoys the sensation before answering. "Even though our souls are in our gems, we still need something in our physical bodies to link the two things together... and since our souls were originally located around here," she points to where her heart is, "that is where our connection to our soul gems remain. My ears and tail are connected to that link... They're not directly connected to my magic but still a part of my magic and a physical part of me but not really physical, if that makes any sense..."

Mami nods in vague understanding, looking surprised. She had no idea there was something connecting their body to their soul gem. Then again, it turns out that she doesn't know a lot of things and she struggles to keep her thoughts from heading down that direction.

Madoka's hand stops moving as she tries to wrap her mind around this information. Homura's ears and tail are enchantments or physical manifestations of her magic. That she understands. And that their bodies have a connection to their soul gem. How those two things are connected however, kind of flies over her head but all she knows is that hurting Homura's ears and tail is a bad thing but petting her seems to be okay.

...Maybe more than okay.

She hears a soft whine and realizes that it's coming from Homura. She blinks, pushing those thoughts away and resumes running her hand across Homura's ears.

Another thought and she swallows nervously as her hand stop once more.

"But..." Madoka stares at Homura and Mami. "But... if... w-what happens if your connection...? Your bodies..."

Homura glances at her, fighting down another whine in her throat and instead leans back against Madoka to feel her warmth. "...most are unaware the connection even

exists," she informs her quietly as Mami's ignorance to this has shown itself clearly. "While it's true we're able to heal any wound on our bodies as long as our soul gem is intact, the amount of magic needed to repair a direct attack straight to the chest—to rebuild the surrounding organs, tissue, bones... most likely they figured that it would be more efficient to disconnect the body instead in order to keep the soul alive..."

That explanation had never really sat right with Homura but answers from Kyuubey were always frustratingly vague the further she tried to delve into soul gems and the connections in their bodies. Which she always felt was strange since he seemed to hold no qualms answering questions most of the time.

Mami's eyes widen. "Doesn't that mean... our souls could be placed with a different body...?"

Homura nods. "I'm not sure how that works, however." Another thing Kyuubey never explained. "But... if your connection is destroyed, the chances of your soul gem being intact will be low. Especially considering how most magical girls fight by themselves and at most you'd have... that thing as your backup. And if you're—" she cuts herself off suddenly and summons her soul gem into her hand, frowning as she stares at it.

It's a muddy purple but Homura isn't bothered by that; it's only a bit darker since she had cleaned it this morning when she had almost fallen in front of Madoka...

"Akemi-san?"

"Homura-chan?"

She looks up and both of them are looking at her in worry.

"...Did you need a grief seed?" Mami asks as she starts reaching into her skirt pocket for her tin container of seeds.

"...No..." she meets Mami's frown with a shake of her head, "at least, not yet. I think... I just figured out how they turn us into witches..."

And why Kyuubey never really explained their connection in their bodies.

"W-What?" Mami blinks at her in confusion. "It's... the despair we accumulate...the corruption of our souls..."

Homura nods as she holds out her soul gem. "Yes, that much is true. That is how we *fall*. But not how witches are *born*. They are related but they are not the same." The gem returns to its ring form and she points to her sternum. "I think...as soon as the link to our body and soul gem is broken... that is the moment when we become a witch... when we lose the final 'link' to our humanity..."

She can picture it clearly in her mind: every time Madoka defeated Walpurgisnacht, she'd always end up lying in the water, clutching her soul gem and corruption clearly visible in her once bright pink jewel. That scream of pain she'd always let out, as if something from inside was tearing her apart; barely able to move her body as she was slowly losing control of it...

And Sayaka's own descent into madness was always so slow... Towards the end, she always relied on disconnecting the link from her soul gem to her body to remove the pain; if she kept her body disconnected, she would feel nothing when the link finally broke...

That unlocks even more questions that Homura definitely has no answers to.

Why hadn't she turned into a witch even though her soul gem was almost pitch black? Because she could still be saved...? Because she still held on...? There had been no pain and the link had remained...

And there were even more questions about their connections; would a fatal wound, such as decapitation break the connection as well? Is it limited to a specific area, like their chest, or is it just set to break when there's too much damage on the body to repair...? A fail safe to maximize energy collected in case the soul gem is broken before a magical girl can become a witch...?

Madoka wordlessly wraps her arms around her.

"What...what are you talking about?" Mami stares. "Are you saying we're able to stop from turning into witches if we prevent this link from breaking?" Mami demands.

Homura pauses as she shifts through her memories.

"...Yes." She closes her eyes. "But... in the end, our fate will remain the same...we will die."

"...How?" Mami asks her quietly.

"...You must avoid taking on too much damage on your body to prevent the link from automatically breaking... you can negate the process by preemptively destroying your soul gem...or," she thinks to the first timeline when Madoka had merely *died* and that thought makes her heart hurt, "...you need to somehow die without regrets. The link is most likely connected to our emotions. I think... somehow it can detect when a person has finally given up to their despair. Once you reach the point of no return..."

That last bit makes Homura want to laugh; that meant that she was guaranteed to turn into a witch no matter what unless she killed herself and she has no doubt Mami is thinking the same.

Madoka hugs her tighter.

Mami clears her throat, obviously wanting to change the subject. "...You said before it didn't hurt as badly? Injuring your tail?"

Homura opens her eyes and nods once more. "Yes, in the previous..." she amends her words as they look at her curiously. "Before, I had my tail cut off..."

Madoka gasps and turns worried eyes toward her tail. "But... it... grew back...?"

"Yes. I just had to reshape it with my magic and it rebuilt itself. And before you ask, yes, I had to. Without it I felt...unbalanced...?" she shakes her head. "Regardless, I wasn't aware someone else's magic could do the same... But, the pain was definitely not as bad. And if I disconnected the link between my body and soul, I could barely feel it. It didn't work though, this time..."

Mami frowns slightly. "What did it feel like...?" she asks curiously.

Homura tentatively nudges Madoka with her head, noting the other girl hardly reacts before she presses her face into Madoka's neck.

Her voice is slightly muffled as she answers. "...Something I could do without feeling ever again..."

If that's what it felt like to become a witch, then...

"...Perhaps we should figure out a way to protect your tail and ears," Mami says after a moment.

Homura nods, closing her eyes.

Her physical manifestations are definitely stronger in this timeline than in the previous one. And that, would explain her stronger animal instincts. If she has to repeat another timeline, the link and connection will most likely increase and she's not sure how long it'll be until she completely loses her ties to her humanity.

Despair, eventual insanity, loss of humanity or suicide...

All she knows now is that the clock is definitely ticking down.

\\

As they continue their walk towards the closest convenience store, Sayaka finds herself disturbed by Kyouko's uncharacteristic silence. She figures it definitely has something to do with her injuring Homura's tail—no doubt she's feeling guilty with how that game had ended.

It reminds Sayaka that she really shouldn't put so much weight against first impressions; Kyouko is definitely turning out to be more than she appeared to be.

Sayaka sighs, placing her hands behind her head as she stares into the evening sky, taking note the sun is starting to set.

When had it gotten so late...?

She glances to Kyouko out of the corner of her eye before smiling a rueful smile.

"You know, I did something similar to the transfer student too."

Kyouko pauses before she continues her walk and turns to Sayaka. "Yeah?"

"When she first transformed," Sayaka smirks. "It surprised us, you know? I definitely thought her ears and tail were fake. So I kinda, sort of, pulled her tail."

Kyouko stares at her, shaking her head. "Wow. That's pretty bad..."

"W-What?" Sayaka sputters at her.

"I mean, mine was an accident. But you deliberately tried to pull her tail? Geez, don't you know how sensitive a cat's tail is?"

Sayaka frowns at her, immediately kicking herself for trying to make Kyouko feel better.

Kyouko grins. "I knew you'd be the biggest jerk around here."

Sayaka scoffs. "Pretty sure that's you, slasher."

"'Slasher?'" Kyouko raises her eyebrow at her.

Sayaka coughs awkwardly, looking away. "Temporary. I'll think of a better one later."

"Uh huh..." Kyouko stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets and the conversation tapers back into silence.

Sayaka looks around, knowing that there's still a good amount of distance until they reach the store. That was the problem with training in such a remote area but Homura obviously had a real reason for that. It makes her remember Kyuubey and his words and even though the thought of him makes her angry, she curiously summons her soul gem into her palm and watches as it shines. She hadn't even felt anything on her way to the abandoned lot earlier but the reaction tells her of a familiar being nearby.

Kyouko stares at her and shakes her head. "Nah, you remember what that guy said? A lot of the trails here lead to dead ends... This place is so old, there's traces of things no longer here."

Sayaka blinks at her. "Yeah? But... we've been patrolling around old places. There's always something there..." She moves her hand around and there's a glow at all directions.

Kyouko sighs, reminded of her inexperience. "This is one of the *oldest* districts in the city. Pretty sure Mami usually sticks closer to downtown."

Sayaka thinks for a moment before realizing that Kyouko is right. They did go to older districts but they were always the ones neighboring populated areas or at least adjacent to those. Homura's choice for their training grounds is further out, towards the outskirts of the city where they haven't really visited much, if at all.

"Anyways, this place?" Kyouko continues as she gestures around. "There's no people here, really, so there's really no reason for there to be witches. They only come here to hide until they recover or whatever the hell witches do and then they're gone. But, because so many of them gather here... the traces of magic they leave kind of slowly builds... stacking on top of each other and those give off false positives." She pauses, trying to think of an example. "Like, you know haunted houses and stuff? Sometimes those are witches but mostly they're just their memories still lingering on. I had no idea it affected Kyuubey's sensors though. Good to know..."

Her voice is distant and Sayaka watches her, curious.

Kyouko grins suddenly. "My sister used to love cats."

The change in subject has Sayaka blinking but she nods slowly. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. But our mom was allergic so we couldn't really keep one. Me though, I prefer dogs. They're definitely more fun to play with and not as stand offish like Kitty Cat."

"I don't know," Sayaka comments. "She seems pretty affectionate to Madoka..."

They both smirk at this and Kyouko's face softens as she seems lost in her own memories. "We brought back a cat once—it had been abandoned right by our school and she saw it when we were coming home. It was this little grey thing, barely the size of my hand..." she withdraws her hand from her pocket and holds it out, almost like she's remembering holding it. "But it was sick. And we tried everything we could, but it wouldn't get better and we eventually told our dad. We thought he'd be mad that we had hid it, but all he did was take one look at it and went with us to the vet."

Sayaka waits for her to continue and watches as she closes her hand into a fist.

"It didn't survive. We had waited too long and by the time we got there, whatever infection it had had spread too far and it was already too late. My sister cried of course. We took him home and buried him in the backyard and my dad read him his rites, offering him a prayer so he could get to kitty heaven..."

Kyouko covers her eyes with her arm as she tilts her head upwards. "I don't even know why I suddenly remembered that."

She lies; she knows why.

Sayaka scratches her head awkwardly. "Your sister... does she no longer like cats?"

Kyouko pulls her arm away and Sayaka can see that her eyes are dry. "Nah. She's up there now, playing with all the cats she wants."

Sayaka sucks in a sharp breath.

"Come on, we should hurry and bring Kitty Cat her milk," Kyouko tells her as she takes the lead and they head towards an alleyway.

Sayaka blinks, wiping her eyes before running to catch up.

"Hey, wait up. I know you have no money so you should at least wait for me since I'm gonna pay for everything..."

\\

Homura knows they should be taking this opportunity to train some more or something but instead she finds herself falling asleep as Madoka holds her close. Her sleepless nights are catching up to her and she's just about to drift off when Mami interrupts their comfortable silence and she forces her eyes open to focus on her words.

"...I envy you, Kaname-san," Mami admits almost guiltily.

Madoka glances up at her in surprise. "Mami-san...?"

Mami closes her eyes. "To have someone so close to you... someone truly loyal who really cares about you..." she exhales a trembling breath. "I—" she freezes and opens her eyes to see Madoka holding her hand.

"You're not alone, Mami-san," Madoka tells her with a smile. "You have me and Homura-chan. Sayaka-chan. Kyouko-chan. You're our senpai, but more than that, you're our friend."

Mami blinks back the tears, a smile finding its way to her face. "Thank you, Kaname-san."

Homura is too sleepy and too content to let go of Madoka and instead places her tail on Mami's leg. It catches the blonde by surprise and she glances down before looking over to see lavender eyes peering at her, an offered nod, before Homura buries her face back into Madoka's neck.

"That tickles, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her but makes no effort to move.

Mami's jealousy lessens as Madoka continues to hold her hand and she reaches out, patting the smaller girl's hand before moving it and setting it back to rest on Homura's waist.

"Thank you Kaname-san. I'm alright now."

Madoka looks at her, glances down to Homura and suddenly grins. "Do you want to borrow Homura-chan for a bit?"

The girl in question stiffens before holding onto Madoka tighter.

Mami smiles at this. "I don't think she likes that idea very much. Cats are very particular, after all."

Though Madoka can't see her face, Homura's flat ears tell her that she's pouting and she reaches up to scratch her ears. "I was just kidding, Homura-chan. You're nice and warm so I don't want to let you go yet."

Mami concentrates, pulling back her magical barrier and feels the chill in the air. "The evenings and nights are still cool in spring," she agrees as she sets back up her barrier. "It's starting to get dark as well. After Miki-san and Sakura-san return, we should start our patrols soon..."

Madoka nods, snuggling close to Homura. "I should've worn a thicker sweater. I guess I never really notice since our school jackets are pretty warm..."

Just as Homura is about to offer Madoka her own jacket, her ears perk and she sits up, pulling away much to the smaller girl's disappointment. They are starting to recognize her mannerisms though and Mami concentrates harder before finally feeling two signatures approaching. They turn to the entrance and wait and Madoka deliberately pulls Homura close once more. It takes a few minutes until Sayaka and Kyouko wander back in, plastic bags in hand.

"Yo!" Sayaka holds out a hand to them when they're finally close enough.

"Welcome back you two," Mami tells them.

Kyouko nods, looking at her before quietly taking a seat besides her. Sayaka completes their uneven circle and they place their bags into the middle.

"Grabbed some onigiri and half-off bentous too," Sayaka says as she starts pulling food from the bags. "I guess just take whatever you'd like?"

Homura immediately tries to reach for the milk but Madoka keeps her arms around her waist, moving with her as she pulls away.

"Madoka...?"

"Hmm...?" she closes her eyes.

"T-The..." Homura leans forward as Madoka continues to hold her. "Madoka...?" Her ears flatten as she glances towards the stack of milk boxes that Sayaka has deliberately placed out of her reach. "M-Madoka...?"

Pink eyes open and she can see Mami staring at them in amusement while Sayaka and Kyouko fight over a bentou.

"What's wrong, Homura-chan?" she asks her, smiling lightly.

"...milk...?" her voice is soft, unsure, and Madoka buries her face in Homura's shoulder, hiding her grin.

"What about it, Homura-chan?" She feels Homura move again, no doubt trying to reach for the milk without pulling away from Madoka.

"M-Madoka...?"

"I don't want any, Homura-chan. You can have them all," she tells her, trying her hardest not to laugh.

She hears a soft whine from Homura's throat and finally she lets go, giggling softly.

"Didn't think Pinkie would be such a tease," Kyouko comments as she takes a bite of her rice, the clear winner of the bentou.

Sayaka chokes on her tea and Madoka blushes.

Homura ignores them all, quickly hoarding all the milk for herself.

AN: There is it! Homura getting hurt! But, more explanations on magic and things and ugh, Kyuubey. Didn't think he'd be gone, did you? Sunday is a very long day...

more character development(?), strengthening bonds(?). etc. ? I hope things made sense since I had to make up so many things. Ugh. Had a lot of problems with this chapter which is why it's up so late.

Let's see...

As always, thanks for reading/reviewing.

Passerby-A: You called it ! Homura becoming more feral but she is still quite very human at this point. It's when she gets more emotional that things start getting a bit hazy. Hope the chapter helped explain some of that and if not I failed miserably. Madoka kissing her soul gem was one of my favourite parts to write so I'm glad it had such an impact even though it was such a short sentence. Crunchy meat = the bones that crunch while cats eat small animals like birds and mice... I should one day 'translate' the conversations between Amy and Homura, though sometimes I have no idea what they're saying either.

Psykoakuma: Cat Homura is pretty funny and the mouse part made me laugh too. And there's no way I'd keep Madoka and Homura apart! I don't think Homura would be able to win though with their group exercises... she can't predict what they're going to do since she has never really done any of these exercises with them and she's so paranoid and overly critical about everything. As for the other review you wrote for 10 steps, thanks for reading and noticing my profile. They're simple but I like my custom artwork :)

shrimp puppy: Yes. The previous timeline is where Homura's animal manifestations originated from. If you check out chapter 2, when Homura first runs into Mami, she takes note that Mami has no ears and no tail.

mimo & cjmsone9: thank you for your reviews!

Sometimes I will get lazy and not reply to you people, so I apologize for that. Anyways, hope this story is still interesting... *wants to fast forward to the ending already* ugh.

Chapter 15: strength

With a flash, Kyouko discards her transformation as she yawns. "Man, you'd think a witch with all those minions would've put up a better fight."

Sayaka remains quiet, eyes watching as the bookshelves surrounding them distort and flicker like static on a television screen; the barrier around them is slowly disappearing.

"...You ever wonder what kind of wishes they made?" Sayaka asks, hearing the light clink from the grief seed falling onto the pavement; the first to drop tonight. Her head turns and finally she spots it. She's the closest and she walks over to retrieve it. Her fingers brush over the symbols across the surface and she stares at them, face a torrent of emotions. "If they knew they'd turn into witches... if they regretted making a wish?"

A book.

The girl they just fought—her grief seed had a book emblem.

Kyouko glances at her, hands moving to pull out the pocky Sayaka had bought for her earlier. "Nah. You start thinking about that stuff and things start to get bad, fast. Want one?" she waves the box around and Sayaka blinks. She offers the grief seed to Kyouko. "...Nah, I got a few already. Keep it."

Sayaka stares at her. "...You're being scarily nice," she says, flashing blue and is once more in her regular clothes. She does however, pocket the seed without protest; it is always better to have extra than to have none.

Kyouko shrugs, still holding out the pocky and Sayaka finally takes one.

"Thanks."

"Yeah," she tells her as she pulls out a stick for herself.

They eat in companionable silence as Sayaka once more holds out her summoned soul gem. There's a steady glow and she knows she has found another one. She pauses though, staring at her soul gem.

"...You ever wonder what kind of witches we''ll turn into...? What kind of familiars we'll have... how our barriers will look like..."

—adrowningmermaid—wheelsoffate—

Kyouko grunts lightly. "...Hell if I know. It's not something I think about; not something any of us should be thinking about. What's with you? You were doing fine earlier."

Sayaka remains silent as she starts after the trail. Her footsteps echo against the pavement and her gem lights the way as they head down the darkened streets.

"... I don't know," she finally says. "Just... it has been bothering me for a while... essentially we're killing other magical girls to prolong our own lives... and eventually we'll become the hunted as the cycle continues..."

Kyouko matches pace with her, watching her carefully with narrowed eyes.

"...You gonna witch out on me?"

Sayaka stops and turns to her. "...and if I was?"

A feel of wind on her face and she finds a spear pointed at her neck, the sharp blade nicking her cheek as it grazes past.

"Then I'll kill you before that happens," Kyouko tells her evenly, stick of pocky bobbing from her mouth.

Sayaka stares, blinks, and suddenly she smirks. "...You know, you're the second person to tell me that." She pushes the spear away and it surprisingly gives way without much resistance. "No worries, Sayaka-chan isn't about to go witchy yet!" She points to her already healed cheek and winks.

Kyouko rolls her eyes and her spear disappears. She remains eying Sayaka though as she crunches down on her pocky. "Who else told you that? Kitty Cat?"

Sayaka shakes her head, continuing her walk down the street. "Nope. Mami-san."

"...Huh."

Kyouko is once again besides her and they both turn the corner in silence; they're heading towards downtown now, lights up ahead leading the way.

"Transfer student... she mentioned that you and Mami-san used to be partners."

Kyouko tilts her face to look up at the night sky. The light pollution from the city makes it impossible to spot the stars she knows by heart. "Yeah. And?"

"...Can I ask you what happened?" Sayaka has stopped again and is watching Kyouko who continues on without her.

Kyouko stops a few steps ahead, Sayaka still following her with her eyes. "Difference of opinions. Stuff like that." She shrugs. "Hurry up already."

Sayaka catches up to her, footsteps once more echoing down the street.

"...I went to the hospital today. It's why I was late."

Kyouko glances at her and she can see Sayaka is staring straight ahead. "Yeah? You sick or something?"

Never mind that they are magical girls.

"...No. I went to visit someone..."

"Uh huh..."

Sayaka sighs. "But he wasn't there."

"...did he die?"

Sayaka turns to her with a frown. "No, why would you even think that?"

Kyouko shrugs. "Hospital? Why else?" She takes out another stick of pocky.

"No," Sayaka shakes her head. "He was discharged today. In the morning. Before I went..."

"Oh, so shouldn't that be a good thing?"

Judging by the look on Sayaka's face, maybe not.

"...He didn't tell me. That he'd be going home today..."

"Maybe he was too busy. Too happy. Or whatever. So?" Kyouko gestures aimlessly before taking a bite. "You can just visit him at his house. If you want, you can leave early, whatever. Saves me the trouble of having to babysit you."

Sayaka remains quiet as her one free hand balls into an angry fist.

"What? That's not what you were going to ask me?" Kyouko raises an eyebrow at her. "Man, you are such a hassle. Alright, let me guess," her face adopts a contemplative expression before she snaps her fingers. "You like this guy, and you somehow made a wish to heal him or something."

Seeing Sayaka stiffen has Kyouko blinking.

"...Seriously?" she shakes her head and finishes the stick. "...Didn't Mami warn you that making wishes for someone else never ends well?"

Sayaka nods. "Yeah... but..."

"Geez," Kyouko places her hands behind her head. "If you like the guy so much, you should've just done something different. Break his legs and his arms, or something, you know? Keep him in the hospital. Get him totally dependent on you and—"

Sayaka sends her soul gem back to her finger before rushing at her. She grabs the front of Kyouko's jacket, bunching it in her hands.

"Shut up! Only a sick person would even think of something like that!"

Kyouko smirks, fanged teeth glinting in the low light. "You stay in this business long enough and you'll find out I'm pretty damn normal, thank you very much."

Sayaka growls and angry blue stare into sharp red; a challenge issued with a quirk of an eyebrow.

Sayaka merely shoves her away.

"But," blue eyes turn to her, "...isn't that kind of what you wanted?" Kyouko asks as she pulls out more pocky. "When you made that wish for him, was it really for him? Or was it for you?"

Sayaka's silence is the only answer Kyouko needs.

"See, that's the problem with people like you. You lie to yourself, thinking that you're an amazing person and that there's no way you could have selfish desires, but once you figure out that you do, that's when the world starts ending."

Sayaka closes her eyes and she can feel it—the darkness swelling inside as it threatens to consume her—

"Damn, you really do remind me of how I used to be."

Sayaka opens her eyes in surprise and suddenly there's a finger poking her forehead.

"Listen. Even though we're magical girls, we're still human. And humans are selfish by nature. Do you regret making your wish? Because I don't. My feelings were in the right place; I wanted to save my family, save my life. And technically I did what I set out to do." Kyouko turns her face and Sayaka can see her eyes shining in the dim moonlight. "Do I wish that things had ended differently? Yeah. Hell yeah I do. But what's done is done and I can't take that back. So I accepted what happened and now I'm living day by day, by myself, for myself."

She steps closer to Sayaka and wraps her arm around her shoulders. Sayaka's eyes widen but Kyouko doesn't stop there. She pulls Sayaka down into a headlock, closing her other free hand into a fist and grounds it painfully into Sayaka's skull.

"So stop thinking about those kinds of things, you knucklehead."

She pushes her away and Sayaka stumbles, barely managing to remain upright. She glances at Kyouko through her now messy hair.

"Come on. Let's take a break. I'm feeling hungry and you're paying."

Without waiting for her to reply, Kyouko starts walking away and Sayaka stares after her.

"*Come on*," Kyouko glances over her shoulder and it's the look in her eyes that makes Sayaka follow.

\\

With Homura's handicap now known, she is forced to hang back for her safety and Mami takes to the front lines. Homura and Madoka are working together as they pick off stray familiars, with extra attacks thrown to the witch whenever there's an opening for a clear shot.

And as they continue with their fight, Homura finds that Madoka is good with her bow.

No, better than good; she's reminded of magical girl Madoka. That familiar bow in those small hands. It distracts her more than it should, and the familiar that is supposed to be her responsibility is suddenly picked off by a yellow light.

Madoka.

"Homura-chan? Are you okay?" Madoka's voice is low and slightly breathless. When Homura glances to her, she finds pink eyes scouring the scenery for movement, ever alert and completely different from the usual timid and unsure Madoka.

It makes memories bubble up from nowhere and Homura swallows heavily as she pushes them back down. She then takes a deep breath, giving herself a mental slap before exhaling.

"Yes, I apologize. Perhaps I am a bit more tired than I thought," she tells her instead. She squares her shoulders and sets herself back into the fight, mask falling back into place.

"We'll take a break after this..." Madoka murmurs as she raises her arms. The string pulls back and another familiar is gone with a well positioned arrow.

"Alright..." Homura agrees as she fires a few shots into the witch, saving Mami from a painful slap from a flaming leg.

It takes a few more minutes but Mami is finally bringing the battle to its apex and Madoka and Homura provide cover as she expertly winds her ribbons into her large cannon.

Homura closes her eyes, keeping her ears alert in case there's trouble and Madoka turns away from the brightness.

When eyes open and they face forward once more, they find the witch is dead, the barrier is burning away, and Mami is finishing her cup of tea.

Madoka moves to join her and Homura follows.

"You were great, Mami-san!" Madoka is full of praises and Mami gives her a smile before she returns to her casual dress.

"Thank you, Kaname-san. Although, I must say, you are simply amazing with the bow. I think you might even become a pro before Walpurgisnacht!"

Madoka flushes happily as she shyly looks down. "N-No. Mami-san's the veteran here... it's just beginner's luck," she mumbles.

"Nonsense!" Mami shakes her head and reaches down to grab Madoka's hands that are still clutching the bow. "You should believe in yourself more, Kaname-san! You were amazing. Really. Somehow, when I see you holding that bow, it just feels so... right. Almost as if it was made for you..." Her voice trails off.

They both eye the bow curiously and as one, turn to Homura in question.

Except she's not there.

"Eh? Homura-chan?" Madoka turns her head, frantically searching for the missing girl.

"Akemi-san?" Mami can feel her signature nearby and motions for Madoka to follow her.

The streets are empty, lit by flickering street lights that soak certain ares with an orange tint. They pass under a few before Mami veers off the path and leads them through an alleyway. Dark red brick buildings sandwich them in between and the light fades into pale moonlight the further they step inside.

Mami stops suddenly, holding out her arm in front of Madoka, a gesture telling the smaller girl to remain behind her.

"Ma—"

Mami places a finger to her lips and Madoka snaps her mouth shut. They continue to tiptoe lightly down the barely lit alleyway, shadows dancing menacingly in the corners of their eyes and Madoka unconsciously moves closer to the blonde. Golden eyes glance at her with a reassuring smile before she approaches a corner. She can feel that Homura is beyond this wall but nothing else.

Is it a familiar? A witch?

She turns to Madoka, nodding, before she leaps forward, transformation lighting the area around them. Her musket is in her hands and her eyes quickly evaluate the scene.

"Akemi...-san?"

Mami's confused voice has Madoka rushing out after her as soon as her eyesight clears. The bow string is pulled taut as she prepares for another fight. What she finds, however, has her dropping the bow and the clatter echoes off the walls as it hits the floor. She immediately runs to Homura.

"Stop! Stop, Homura-chan!"

The small enclosed area is bathed in moonlight, giving them a clear view of Homura who is crouching low as her tail flickers from side to side. Her ears are perked and she's concentrated on a corner against the building that is filled with piles of discarded trash.

A goldmine for city rats.

At the same time Homura tenses to prepare her attack, Mami's bright transformation throws her off, forcing her eyes close. When she opens them again, the rat she had been watching is escaping and just as she's about to chase after it, Madoka's voice is calling her back.

Her ears flatten and she turns just as Madoka drops down on her, roping her arms around her shoulders.

"Bad, Homura-chan!"

She can't help it, she emits a soft whine.

"*No,*" Madoka tells her and pulls her up to her feet. "We'll get something to eat if you're hungry." She holds Homura's hand and drags her over to where Mami is still watching them, face still full of surprise.

"... I take it this has happened before?" she asks as she glances between the two.

Madoka nods, frowning at Homura in disapproval.

Homura merely recalls her transformation with Mami following suit, and they wait a moment until their eyes readjust to the mild darkness.

Mami clears her throat. "Akemi-san...? It would be unwise to... eat rats, as they are rather unsanitary..."

Homura crosses her arms across her chest—or tries to anyways, but Madoka is still holding her hand rather tightly. Instead, she turns away.

"...I wasn't going to eat it."

Mami stares at her, blinking. "I see...that's good..."

Madoka isn't convinced, however. "Then what were you going to do with it, Homura-chan?"

Homura is glad her ears and tail are not visible.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura fidgets with the ends of her shirt and glances at Madoka nervously. "...Play with it, for a bit."

"..."

"..."

"...Perhaps we should take a break?" Mami suggests with a placating smile.

Wordlessly, Madoka retrieves her bow from the ground though she makes sure to keep a tight hold on Homura's hand.

"That sounds good, Mami-san," Madoka finally tells her as she stands.

"I know a vending machine close by. There's..." Mami glances to Homura before returning to Madoka, "there's a large selection of milk..."

Homura brightens immediately and gives Madoka a hopeful look.

Madoka finds that she can't resist those eyes and reaches up to pat her on the head. "Lead the way, Mami-san."

Mami nods and starts walking back in the direction they came from.

Homura eagerly trails after her and this time Madoka is the one being pulled along.

"You're so lucky you're so cute, Homura-chan," Madoka mumbles exasperatedly under her breath.

Up ahead, Mami still manages to hear her and giggles lightly into her hand. Homura however, is distracted by thoughts of milk and hears nothing.

\\

When 9pm hits, the five has plans to regroup and Kyouko and Sayaka are the first to arrive at the park near downtown.

Kyouko yawns, dropping herself onto one of the public benches. "I'm gonna nap until they get here."

Sayaka watches as she closes her eyes; it disturbs her how comfortable Kyouko looks sleeping on that metal bench.

Ten minutes pass and Sayaka is now occupying the free spot on the bench. She has already sent Madoka two messages.

Just as she's about to send the third, she can hear echoing footsteps down the street. She looks up as Mami hurries into view with Madoka following after her, dragging a Homura who looks more somber than usual.

"There you guys are! Sooo slow!" Sayaka says as soon as they're close enough that she doesn't need to yell.

Kyouko sits up, stretching and yawning loudly.

"I apologize! Miki-san, Sakura-san," Mami tells them, slightly out of breath.

"Did something happen?" Kyouko eyes them all curiously; they all look a bit frazzled.

"Was it a witch?" Sayaka's irritation drops and she stares at them worriedly.

To their surprise, Mami shakes her head, lips twitching with amusement. "No, it wasn't anything like that," she reassures them before laughing softly.

"We just had some... complications," Madoka fills in, tugging Homura closer to her. She clears her throat. "Right, Homura-chan?"

Said girl nods despondently.

Kyouko and Sayaka can only blink but Kyouko shrugs. "Whatever. Wanna hit one or two more, Mami? Sayaka and I detected at least one on our way here. Should be pretty quick between the two of us."

Sayaka wants to be offended—she really, really does—but she understands she's still learning and both Kyouko and Mami are the obvious veterans here.

And Homura is in her own place somewhere else.

"Alright," Mami agrees easily; she never minds spending more time with other people. She turns to Sayaka. "Miki-san, about what we discussed..."

Sayaka steps back as the others stare at them curiously. "Uhm, can I mail you about that, Mami-san...?"

Mami seems hesitant but she can understand Sayaka's need for privacy. "Yes. Just remember that I am a mere phone call away." She pointedly looks around. "To any of you..." she stops at Kyouko. "... Perhaps we should get you a phone, Sakura-san."

Kyouko yawns again with another shrug, but she suddenly turns angry eyes to Homura. "Actually, more than a phone, what I'd like is some hot water! What the hell, Kitty Cat! You offer me your place but your place sucks! Your water heater doesn't work, your place is drafty as hell especially with that broken window! Plus there's no food at all! Not even crackers in the damn cupboards!"

"Ah," it's like a light bulb switches on in Homura's mind and she blinks. "...well, I did tell you it wasn't that much better than a motel."

Kyouko growls at her. "At least there's hot water there! What's the point in offering me your apartment if I can't even take a hot shower!?"

"E-Eh? T-Then, you were taking cold showers, Homura-chan?" Madoka stares at her in disapproval and Homura shakes her head.

"No," she pauses to corrects herself, "well, yes, but our magic allows us to retain our body temperature and I merely regulated it whenever I needed to shower..."

"Akemi-san..." even Mami sounds disappointed at her.

"It doesn't use that much magic..." her voice trails off when she realizes how weak her argument sounds.

"You are so hopeless, transfer student," Sayaka groans loudly.

Kyouko sighs. "Ugh, maybe I should just take my chances at a motel."

Here, Mami speaks up. "Actually, Sakura-san, there's plenty of room in my apartment and the water heater works fine. If you'd like...we could continue the arrangement you had... before..."

Kyouko scratches her cheek, unsure if she wants to cross that bridge.

"...I am also planning to bake a pie for dessert tomorrow, and will need someone to taste test since I'm trying a new recipe..."

Just like that, she's sold.

"Hot water and food? Sounds way better than your lousy old apartment, Kitty Cat," Kyouko tells her as she digs out the key from her jacket pocket and hands it to Homura. "Your neighbors are pretty loud too. Kept hearing some kid crying last night."

Homura takes the key and slips it into her own pocket. "You must be referring to Elizabeth."

"Yeah, whoever that kid is, louder than some of the other kids in some of the motels I've slept in. Surprised that no one has complained about her."

Homura tilts her head slightly. "Not everyone can hear her."

"Eh?" Kyouko squints her eyes at her in confusion and then she realizes what she means. "Oh. Really? I couldn't even feel it."

Mami seems surprised when she catches on as well. "I had no idea..."

Here, Homura nods. "She's further in the building, towards the stairs that leads to the roof. It's a very isolated barrier... I think it's because it's tied to an object rather than to the actual area..."

Sayaka turns her head, looking at the three of them. "What? What are you talking about?"

Kyouko sighs. "Remember I was talking about those false positives? Seems Kitty Cat's place has one."

Sayaka thinks for a moment before she understands what she means. "Oh! You mean, transfer student's apartment is haunted?"

Madoka gulps loudly, pulling Homura closer. "H-Haunted? But..." she had stepped foot in that apartment!

Misinterpreting Madoka's statement as curiosity, Homura obliges with more information.

"The exact dates of Elizabeth's contract are unknown, but she was a child of one of the first families that had started living in my apartment building when it had first been established. Apparently, during that time, building regulations were a lot more lenient and there was an accident involving one of the cranes used in construction during—" Sayaka's hand suddenly clamps over Homura's mouth.

"Alright, I think that's enough history for today," Sayaka says, gesturing to Madoka. Homura can see that Madoka has her eyes scrunched closed and that her own arm is growing numb from her tight hold.

Sayaka removes her hand when Homura shoots her a glare.

Homura turns to Madoka, trying to shake the feeling back into her arm subtly. "... I mean...perhaps we should head home...?"

Madoka nods quickly in agreement.

"Y-Yes. Home!"

\\

"...So... what happened earlier?" Sayaka asks curiously.

The three of them are now following their usual route that leads to home. They are walking side by side, sidewalks empty and wide enough to accommodate all three.

"Nothing," Madoka tells her as she unconsciously pulls Homura closer.

Sayaka eyes her and leans forward slightly in order to glance at Homura who is once more looking sad.

"Really..."

Madoka nods, though this time she grits her teeth and gives Sayaka a forced smile. "*Really*." She mutters something under breath.

Sayaka catches random words that make no sense and she decides to drop it as they continue their silent walk.

"...What about you, Sayaka-chan?"

"Huh?" Lost in her thoughts, Sayaka turns and finds Madoka looking at her in worry.

"You were late today."

"Ah!" Sayaka scratches her head and laughs nervously. "It was nothing, really. My mom wanted me to go do some errands for her. That's it!"

Madoka stops walking to stare at her. "Really...?"

Sayaka spins on the front of her foot and gives Madoka a grin. "*Really*."

Madoka can hear it—the dismissal in her tone and she looks around, noticing they are almost towards Sayaka's apartment complex. She places the hand not holding Homura's on Sayaka's.

"Sayaka-chan. I know... I haven't been there for you lately. I'm really sorry for that."

The grin drops from Sayaka's face and she stares at Madoka seriously. "Mado—"

"But!" Madoka's surprisingly steady eyes lock onto hers. "You know I'll always be there for you, right? No matter what. If you need someone to talk to—whenever, you can call me, whatever! Anytime! You know that, right?"

Sayaka smiles softly at her. "Yeah. I know. Thanks, Madoka."

"Good," Madoka breathes out and returns her smile.

The air seems lighter now as they turn the street corner.

"So uh... Madoka?"

"Hmm?"

"What really happened with you and the transfer student?"

This earns her a glare from Madoka.

"Nothing! *Nothing* happened!"

/

"We're home!"

As soon as Madoka and Homura enter the living room, both her parents turn to greet them. Junko is currently seated at the dining room table while Tomohisa is in his usual spot behind the kitchen counter.

"Welcome home, you two," Junko eyes them curiously, noticing their intertwined hands but decides not to comment. "You two are quite late."

Madoka gives her mom a nervous smile. "Yes, but I did call earlier, remember?"

Junko crosses her arms across her chest and there's a tense moment when Madoka is afraid she's about to be punished. Instead, Junko relaxes and nods.

"Yes, you did."

Madoka gives a sigh of relief.

"Did you two have fun today?" Junko asks.

"Yeah!" Madoka nods. "Lots. It's why we're so late."

"Good, good. The bath's free. Mama got first dibs today," Junko tells her with a grin. "First bath is always the best."

Madoka turns to Homura. "Homura-chan, you can go first."

"Oh, uhm," she finally raises her head to look at Madoka. "But..."

"It's fine. I want to talk with Mama and Papa more."

Homura glances at her and nods, pulling her hand away. "Alright. Uhm..." she looks to Junko and Tomohisa nervously. She then bows her head lightly and heads down the hallway towards Madoka's room.

Junko and Madoka both watch her until she disappears out of their view.

"She's still as nervous around us, hm?" Junko comments lightly as Madoka takes a seat across from her.

"Would you like something to drink, Madoka?" Tomohisa asks her and holds out her familiar cup.

"Sure—"

"Ahhh, hot cocoa, Madoka?" Junko raises an eyebrow at her. "Are you sure you can handle that responsibility?"

Madoka pouts. "Mama! I don't always spill it! And I had it the other day, right, Papa?" She turns to her dad who smiles at the both of them. "And I didn't spill it at all!"

Tomohisa nods, coming to his daughter's defense. "Yes, she drank the whole cup and not one drop got on her clothes."

Junko sighs. "Alright. Maybe it's because it's Papa's special blend; anything else goes flying out of Madoka's hands."

Madoka turns to her mother who grins cheekily.

"I'm kidding, Madoka! So what did you do today?"

"Oh, uhmmmmm..." Madoka tries to find something normal to tell her mom. "Well, we walked around the mall for a bit, but there was nothing good...Oh! We tried out that new restaurant that just opened up near the fifth avenue bus stop."

"Ah?" Junko thinks for a moment. "Ooh that one! I've been wanting to try it since it's so close to work. How is it?"

"Really good! They have a really nice selection too!"

"Well, it's their grand opening, they gotta bring in customers somehow. It's when a few months pass, that's when you know for sure if the restaurant is a keeper or not. Maybe I'll drop by lunch sometime this week."

"It was still pretty busy even though we went after lunch time," Madoka warns her. "They have some kind of afternoon special for their grand opening."

Junko winks at her. "That's why you go a bit early! That's the good thing about being in such a high position, Madoka. You're allowed to take an early lunch!"

"Here you go, Madoka," there's a light clatter as Tomohisa places the individual hot cocoa maker on the table. "It'll be done in a bit."

"Thanks, Papa!" Madoka grins at him and she finally notices the bentou containers opened on the counter. "Oh, are you making our lunch now?"

Tomohisa nods. "Planning mostly." He notices Madoka staring. "Did you have a request?"

"Ah," she looks up to see her dad smiling at her. "W-Well, uhm..."

"Papa can make anything, Madoka!" Junko tells her with a wave of her hand. "Don't hold back now, you know he loves cooking for us!"

Madoka nods. "Well, it's more for Homura-chan than me, really. But uhm. I think she needs some more meat in her diet..."

Junko thinks. "She is pretty thin, isn't she? Is that why she's always so shy and refuses to change in front of us?"

Madoka pauses. "I'm... not sure, actually." Now that she thinks about it, Homura always changes in the nurse's office for gym as well.

"What kind of meat would Homura-chan prefer?" Tomohisa asks curiously, drawing her back into the conversation.

"Oh... hmm," Madoka glances over in the direction of the hallway. "Probably... chicken. Though, I think any meat is good. Just. More of it."

"So any meat, as long as there's more?"

"Yes," Madoka agrees.

"Do you have any special requests then, Madoka?"

"Hm? No, not really. I love anything Papa cooks!"

"Maybe we should have you eat some more meat too," Junko jokes. "Maybe you'll grow taller."

"I'm still growing!" Madoka pouts. "Just... slowly."

"Uh huh."

"Very slowly..."

They continue to joke around and once Madoka finishes her hot cocoa, she gives her parents both a good night kiss and heads to her room.

She finds the door slightly ajar with the lights on, but no Homura waiting for her.

"Eh? She's still taking her bath?" Madoka looks to the clock and estimates that at least half an hour has passed; Homura usually takes at most, 15 minutes. "Maybe she's taking her time today..."

Madoka heads to her desk, scratching the dozing Amy on the ears before pulling out her homework. She is glad that they hadn't been assigned much this weekend and figures she can work on it somewhat while waiting for Homura to finish her bath.

As the minutes tick by and she finds herself stuck on the first problem of her math homework, Madoka feels herself growing on edge as Homura's impromptu ghost story suddenly fills her mind. Amy is there, asleep in her little cubby box on her desk, and there's a bit of comfort watching her sleeping figure—but for some reason, the shadows feel more ominous. She can't help but look behind her out of gnawing fear.

Sure, witches are technically scarier, but... didn't that also mean that witches are ghosts...?

She shudders.

A glance at the clock—it's been almost 40 minutes since Homura first went in to take her bath— and Madoka's fear turns into worry.

She stands, careful to remain quiet to keep from waking Amy, and slowly makes her way to the bathroom.

She can hear the TV from the living room down the hallway, her parents watching whatever late night show.

Without bothering to knock, Madoka enters the bathroom, closing the door behind her as she makes her way further in to where the bathing area is.

The hamper by the bath entrance is filled with Homura's clothes, folded nicely, and Madoka pauses, listening for something to sound beyond the bath door.

There's a drip of water but nothing else and worry invades her mind; where is she?

Bracing for possible scenarios, Madoka takes a deep breath before exhaling to calm her nerves. She then places her hand on the sliding door and knocks twice.

"Homura-chan?"

No answer.

She tries again, louder this time.

"Homura-chan?"

Her brows furrow in worry and she quickly slides the door open. "Homura—" she straightens as she sees the familiar girl sitting against the tub, blushing when she notices her naked figure.

There's a sudden flashback to this morning and her eyes immediately search for bloodstains.

None.

"Homu..ra-chan...?" Her soft voice echoes lightly but there's no reply. Madoka can feel her heartbeat quicken with panic and she crosses the distance to close the gap. She can see that Homura is breathing fine and that her eyes are closed.

Sleeping.

She's only sleeping.

"You'll catch a cold sleeping like that, Homura-chan," Madoka scolds her but the relief she feels is immediate.

Unconsciously, her eyes are drawn to the painful looking scar in the middle of Homura's chest; what had happened and where did it come from? Madoka wants to know but—

Madoka kneels and places a hesitant hand on her bare shoulder. For once, Homura's expression looks peaceful and she feels guilty for disturbing her.

"Homura-chan?" She shakes her gently.

No reply.

"Homura-chan?" She tries harder this time and though the girl stirs, she doesn't awaken. "She must be more tired than I thought..." Madoka bites her lip, feeling guilty for not noticing. "Homura-chan?" she's rougher this time and finally bleary lavender eyes open to stare at her in confusion. She ignores her guilt and gives her a smile.

"Madoka...?" Homura's brows furrow and she blinks sleepily, trying to remember where, when, she is.

"You fell asleep in the middle of your bath..." Madoka informs her. It takes a moment before Homura blushes as she realizes her state of undress.

"A-ah..." she brings her arms closer to her body for a semblance of modesty, and to hide the large scar that runs down her sternum.

Madoka debates a moment before she stands up.

"I'll be right back, Homura-chan."

Before she can reply, Madoka is heading out and sliding the door closed behind her.

Alone once more, Homura relaxes and tries to shake the fatigue from her body; she had only closed her eyes briefly, but a moment had turned into a moment too long.

This happened occasionally at her apartment but she's no longer living there. She resolves to be more careful. If Junko had checked on her...

The thought is like a bucket of cold water and she sits up as the sleepiness fades away.

She glances around, unable to remember how far she had gone through with her washing. She decides she'll just pretend like nothing happened and take a quick shower. She has occupied the bathroom for long enough already.

She moves to stand but freezes when she hears sounds from outside. Not knowing what to do, she remains sitting on the floor as her eyes focus on the only opening in the room.

She can hear shuffling and her eyes widen when Madoka appears, face slightly flushed with only a towel wrapped around her body.

Homura quickly averts her eyes as she hears the door close once more. She has bathed with Madoka on a few occasions, but it still doesn't make it any less embarrassing.

"...I hope you don't mind, Homura-chan," Madoka says softly, walking past her. She grabs a small wash tub and heads to the faucet to fill it with water to rinse off. "I always bathe with Sayaka-chan whenever she sleeps over...a-and this way I can help you in case anything happens..." she mumbles something under her breath but Homura's sure

she mentioned something about ghosts. Homura realizes it's her fault that Madoka is afraid to bathe alone.

"...I-It's fine, Madoka," Homura says and just to show she's okay, she unfolds her arms from her body though the tips of her ears pink involuntarily.

"Thanks, Homura-chan," pink eyes glance over before darting off to the side.

It's awkward and for some reason, the two of them can't keep the blushes off their faces.

After a quick rinse, they're unable to decide who will go in first and they both enter the bathtub at the same time. Homura is at least relieved to find the tub is big enough that they're able to remain on opposite sides. Madoka takes a steadying breath before turning to Homura.

"Let me wash your back for you, Homura-chan."

"E-Eh?" the other girl jumps slightly. "T-That's okay, Madoka, I'm fin—"

She's interrupted with a splash of water. Madoka is suddenly there, very naked and in front of her with an expression that tells her she won't accept anything other than yes.

"I-I..." Homura's back presses against the suddenly too small bathtub and she swallows nervously. "U-Uhm...okay, t-thank you, Madoka," she squeaks out.

Madoka nods. She stands and exits the bathtub. Knowing she has to comply, Homura stands as well. She unconsciously places her arm in front of her scar as she steps out of the tub, making her way to the bath stool that Madoka is expectantly waiting behind.

Wordlessly, Homura takes a seat as Madoka grabs the soap and a washcloth.

"U-Uhm. I-I'm going to—wash your back now, Homura-chan..." Madoka tells her quietly.

Gulping audibly, Homura nods. "O-Okay, Madoka..."

Homura stiffens at her touch and Madoka can feel how tense she is through the thin fabric. Ignoring her own embarrassment, she gently scrubs the cloth back and forth along the girl's back, leaving soap bubbles on her skin.

They remain quiet and Madoka can't help but notice how pale and white Homura is. But more than that, she's thin—so thin—and Madoka pauses as she glides the cloth along the visible bones of Homura's spine.

So very thin.

A glance further down and she can see there's a circle of pinkness on her side that stands out from her pale complexion. Madoka's hands grip the washcloth tighter as she recalls that fear she felt just the other day.

It's a reminder that really, she knows nothing about Homura at all.

How long has she been fighting?

How long has she been struggling all by herself?

Unbidden tears form and a drop hits Homura's exposed back.

"Madoka...?" Homura had noticed the girl had stopped. She shifts her head so that she can look behind her.

Before she can though, a warm body is pressed against her and she forces her ears and tail down from the surprise.

"M-Madoka?" Homura is very aware the other girl has nothing on and it takes all her self-control to not run away.

She stops panicking though, when she realizes that Madoka is crying and quickly turns around.

"What's wrong, Madoka?" she hesitates and then places her hands on her bare shoulders.

Madoka shakes her head and tries to give her a smile. "N-Nothing," she sniffles loudly. "I-It's just..." her lip trembles and she barely remembers that she can't wipe her eyes with her hands since they're covered in soap. She lets out a small laugh and shakes her head again. "I-I don't even know anything about you, Homura-chan. Your f-favourite colour. Your favourite food. If you prefer rice or bread," her voice drops lower, "...or how you even got that scar on your chest..."

Homura is at first bewildered, wondering what colours and food has to do with anything —but then it hits her—Madoka is merely being Madoka.

Homura's face softens. She reaches out and brushes the tears from Madoka's cheeks. It earns her a blush as pink eyes lock with her own.

"Purple, because it reminds me of my mother," she pushes down whatever thoughts that brought up, "...strawberry milk, because it reminds me of..." Madoka stares hard at Homura's face, wondering who she's referring to though the blush and the averted eyes makes her heart skip a beat. "Bread, because it's easier and faster to eat," Madoka almost smiles at this, "and..." Homura lowers her hands from Madoka's face to brush the disfigured scarring on top of her sternum. "I was in the hospital for a while because I was recovering from open heart surgery. It's why I had the appointment the other day."

Madoka gasps lightly but Homura shakes her head.

"I'm fine—they managed to fix whatever they needed to. The check-up was to make sure that everything is working. Though, I'm still not supposed to overwork myself and for that reason, I have to use magic to protect my heart, just in case."

Madoka eyes widen slightly. "...Is that why you seemed so out of breath when we were playing tag? W-Won't it hurt your heart in the end...?"

Homura stares at her scar absently. "Truthfully? I'm not sure. I believe as long as I continue to protect my heart with magic I should be fine. Plus, if there's damage to my heart, there's—" she cuts herself off when she sees Madoka frowning at her in disappointment. She clears her throat. "Uhm. I mean, i-it should be fine..."

There's a lull in their conversation and slowly they remember their surroundings, how close they are to each other and how dressed they aren't.

They jump apart, both faces flushed and bright red.

"U-Uhm.." Madoka slaps her cheeks to try and control her emotions.

Likewise, Homura concentrates on staring at the floor. "W-We should finish our bath..."

"Y-Yes..." she glances over to the other girl shyly. "I didn't finish washing your back for you," lavender eyes dart to her before looking away. "Also, do you think you can show

me how you wash your hair so quickly, Homura-chan?" It's an attempt to lighten the mood and Madoka can't help but smile when Homura turns back to look at her.

"A-Alright."

\\

Madoka's not sure if it's good to stop time just to wash hair faster and once they're done, she voices her thoughts.

Homura shakes her head, toweling off the rest of her hair. "It's... I use a lot less time magic during this—uhm, now. Because of my physical manifestations."

Madoka catches the correction and files that into the back of her mind. "Isn't that a good thing though?" she asks instead.

Homura fidgets with the ends of towel. "Yes and no. It means I have more to use—during our fight with Walpurgisnacht. But...I need to have at least half of the timer filled up before then, or else—" she cuts herself off again.

Madoka blinks at her. "What happens if you don't have it filled up?"

Homura remains quiet, eyes darting nervously around the room.

Madoka stares at her. "...You can't tell me?" Homura shakes her head. "...Or you won't tell me?"

Homura finally looks up but Madoka is already turning away, towel in hand as she starts drying off.

"U-Uhm...t-the..." She wants to tell her—she really, really does—but, it's still too early and—

"It's okay, Homura-chan," Madoka turns back to her with a sad smile. "I understand. Uhm... I have some homework I need help with... If you're not too tired, can you help with me that?"

Homura nods eagerly. "Y-Yes, of course, Madoka."

"Thanks," she grins at her before returning to her task.

\\

It's a bit after midnight when Madoka finally finishes her homework.

Once the light is off, Madoka crawls into her bed but Homura remains standing nearby. She's nervous as she remembers last night, how she had all but unraveled and had nearly killed Madoka. The familiar feeling of the carpet under her feet and just by being in Madoka's room spikes up her pulse. She can feel herself panicking and resolves to sleep in the living room, or maybe even outside. Somewhere far, far away from Madoka; she obviously can't be trusted in case she does something even worse.

As if sensing her reluctance and plans, Madoka pats the spot on the bed where Homura usually sleeps. "Come here, Homura-chan."

She hears a soft whimper and can barely make out Homura shaking her head in the pale moonlight.

"Come here, Homura-chan," she repeats once more. Another whine. "Please? Homura-chan? Please?" She knows this is getting them nowhere and she moves out of bed and approaches the other girl who backs away. "Homura-chan?"

"N-No. I might... I might..."

Madoka steps forward as Homura steps back. "You won't."

"I..."

"*You won't*. Come here, Homura-chan."

"N-No. Y-You'll-"

"*You won't*."

Homura's back hits the desk. "N-No—"

"Meow."

They both blink.

"Meow."

"N-No... I don't plan to," Homura replies softly.

"Meow."

"But..."

"Meow."

"I-It'd be better if I slept somewhere else..."

Amy hisses at her and Homura flinches.

"Meow."

"..."

Madoka takes this as a sign of submission and locates Homura's arm in the dark. "Come on, Homura-chan. Let's go to sleep."

"Bu—"

"*Meow*."

"..."

Madoka drags her to their shared bed and pulls Homura down to lie next to her. She covers them both with the blanket and once that is done, she wraps her arms around the other girl who immediately stiffens.

"M-Madoka?" evident fear, but Madoka ignores it and pulls her closer.

"Homura-chan..." the seriousness in her voice has Homura looking at her. "I...know right now, that... I'm not strong enough to support you." She can feel Homura move to protest and stops her. "Shh, let me finish telling you this first, okay?"

She feels Homura nod and Madoka tightens her arms around her. "Right now, being strong, 'like Madoka' isn't enough, but I'm going to work on that, okay, Homura-chan? So that I can be there for you. For Sayaka-chan. For Mami-san and Kyouko-chan. I'll be strong enough for all four of you to depend on me. I want you to trust me, okay? And even though, right now, I know you can't, I know that one day you will be able to, and in the mean time, I will be there for you, as much as you will allow me to be, okay? I will wait as long as you need me to... but I want you to know that I trust you, Homura-chan. I trust you, Homura-chan, and I know you'd never deliberately hurt me. I know this and I trust you. I know, I told you to believe in me, but maybe, what you need more is someone to believe in you. I believe in you, Homura-chan."

Homura can feel tears prickling in her eyes and remains silent as hands press into her back. She's pulled close until her head is resting against Madoka's chest.

She can hear her steady heartbeat.

"I believe in you, Homura-chan," Madoka repeats softly.

Homura's hands tighten around Madoka and she buries her face in Madoka's chest.

There's a light touch as Madoka kisses her softly on the top of her head.

"We should sleep—there's school tomorrow. Goodnight, Homura-chan." Arms hold her tightly and Homura can feel Madoka's chest rise and lower with every breath; it's comforting.

"...goodnight, Madoka."

She closes her eyes and Madoka's heartbeats lull her to sleep.

\\

That night, she finally dreams a good dream. It's a memory—one of her first successful witch hunts when Madoka could still be a magical girl and Mami was her reliable senpai.

Though she had been mostly useless due to her fear of falling off those really thin clotheslines, once Mami had set up her ribbons to create a safe runway, it had been her time to shine. She had activated her time magic and had somehow successfully managed to blow up the witch with her first home-made bomb.

The best part though, was when the witch was dead and just as her feet hit the floor, Madoka had rushed to her side to deliver a bone-crushing hug and a loud congratulatory 'You did it! Homura-chan!'

Homura's still waiting for that day, when she destroys Walpurgisnacht and Madoka is by her side, hugging her and telling her those same exact words once more.

Unconsciously, she tightens her grip on Madoka as they continue to sleep, both taking comfort in their shared warmt**h.**

AN: yay. chapters keep getting longer. finally the end of Sunday! As for how long until the ending... If you take into account of how each day is either split into one or two chapters, and how long until Walpurgisnacht arrives (less than two weeks) and how we're at chapter 14, but really, only like a WEEK has passed... there's at least ~20 chapters to go. Maybe a bit less, maybe more. So we're not even at the halfway mark at this point. And if I continue to update every week, this story should finish by... the end

of the year! *claps wildly yet sarcastically* right now I'm still ahead of the game, but once chapter 21 hits there's a huge wall to overcome... and who knows how far my interest will take me.

Anyways, enough about that.

Thanks for reading like alwayssssss and reviewing like alwayssss. :) Always the same people, but you guys are the best. I really only update for you ;(Otherwise, I would've just left these chapters in my doc manager. And believe me, there's a bunch there. haha.

Chapter 16: salvation

Homura's quietly changing into her uniform in Madoka's room when she finally notices it.

She pauses, fingers hovering by her shirt buttons when she feels it again: a soft, barely noticeable, yet steady rhythm following her own heartbeat.

She blinks in confusion, but there's a knock on the door and she quickly jumps, realizing she's still only half dressed.

"Homura-chan? Are you ready yet?" Madoka's muffled voice sounds behind the door.

"W-Wait, g-give me a moment," she calls out, quickly buttoning up the rest of her shirt. They had bathed together yesterday, but she still finds herself embarrassed. She grabs her skirt, slips that on, and finally turns to the door. "I'm ready, Madoka."

The door opens and Madoka pokes her head in just as Homura finishes donning her jacket. She watches as she pulls out her long hair from inside her jacket, flicking it behind her and turns to acknowledge Madoka's entrance.

"Did... you need something?" Homura asks her, already moving to retrieve their bags from besides Madoka's desk.

"No, not really," Madoka tells her, eyes still watching her.

Homura tilts her head in slight confusion, joining Madoka once she has their book bags in her hands.

"Is... there something wrong?" she asks instead.

"No," Madoka shakes her head.

"Madoka?"

"Nothing." Madoka smiles. She reaches down to grab her bag with one hand, and Homura's hand with the other. "Breakfast is ready. Let's go eat."

"Madoka?"

Madoka merely drags Homura with her, leaving the door half closed as she's pulled out of the room.

\\

"Will you two be home for dinner?"

The fork in Homura's hand stops right before reaching her mouth as she throws Junko a nervous glance.

Madoka swallows her food before replying. "Uhm, we were thinking about having dinner at a friend's house... is that alright?"

Junko sighs, placing her cup of coffee down onto the table with a soft clatter. "Is there something wrong, Madoka? Homura? Is there a reason why you don't want to eat dinner with us? Is this..." her voice drops to a whisper, "a sign of teenage delinquency?" She places her hand to her forehead, tilting her head back and closes her eyes, prompting Takkun to giggle at her. "They say family values are what keeps kids grounded... refusing dinner one day... what's next? Truancy from school? Drugs? Petty crime?"

Homura gives Madoka a panicked look.

"Mama," Madoka says exasperatedly, while at the same time trying to reassure Homura. "I-It's not that. We just promised that we'd go over there tonight. Our friend is trying out a new recipe and invited us over. We'll be home tomorrow."

Her voice remains ever steady and Junko finally nods.

"Alright. It's just that Mama has been lonely without Madoka here, and Homura is still so shy," she comments, eyes glancing over to Homura who quickly looks away. "See?" Madoka grins. "It's always better when all of us are at home, eating together. That includes you too, Homura."

Said girl ducks her head lower, earning her a sigh from Junko.

"Don't worry, we'll be home tomorrow," Madoka reaffirms.

"Good!" Junko takes another sip of her coffee. "Is this friend of yours the same one that you girls went to visit while searching for Amy? What was her name again? Mami?"

"Yes," Madoka answers in between bites. "Her name is Tomoe Mami."

Junko places her cup down and leans forward slightly. "That girl... she's only a year older than you two, right?"

"Mmhmm," Madoka agrees. She glances over and sees Homura is opting out of the conversation by drinking her milk.

Junko raises an eyebrow at her. "Perhaps... we should find out what she eats." Her eyes deliberately drop lower and Madoka squeaks when she realizes what her mom is looking at.

"Mama!"

/

The two are walking side by side and Homura finds her hands intertwined with Madoka's once more.

Her brows furrow. "Madoka?"

"Hmm?" the smaller girl turns to her.

"Uhm. Is... there a reason...?" Homura glances down to their hands before her eyes move back up.

Madoka doesn't reply, merely gripping her hand tighter.

They continue their walk for a moment, before Homura looks at Madoka once more.

"M-Madoka?"

"Hmm?"

"...A-Are you still mad, because of yesterday...?"

Madoka gives her a smile. "What makes you say that, Homura-chan?"

"N-No reason..."

She lets the subject drop.

As they approach the meeting point where they usually meet Sayaka and Hitomi, Homura stops walking.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka glances back at her. She's about to tug her forward when she sees Homura place her free hand over her chest. "What's wrong?" she remembers Homura's scar and hurries over in worry, thoughts of damage to Homura's heart running through her mind.

"...Nothing." Homura shakes her head, already moving to dismiss it. Madoka remains in her spot and Homura turns back when she realizes Madoka isn't following. "Madoka?"

There's a frown on her lips. "...I can't help you if you don't let me, Homura-chan."

"...It's not important."

"*Anything* about you is important." There's a fierce look in Madoka's eyes.

Homura can only stare at her.

She finally relents. "There's... something strange with my link." She immediately holds out a hand to stop Madoka's panic. "No, it doesn't hurt or anything. It's... it just feels like..." she pauses, trying to find the correct words, "as if I can feel another heart beat..."

Madoka blinks in surprise and steps closer. Without warning, she places her hand on Homura's chest, right over her heart.

Homura blushes, quickly glancing around, glad that they haven't reached the main road yet where other students also travel.

"...I don't feel anything different," Madoka tells her as she removes her hand. She looks up and notices the red on Homura's cheeks. Her eyes widen and she suddenly flushes. "S-Sorry, Homura-chan! I—just..." she gulps nervously and steps back. "Sorry..."

"I-It's okay," Homura shakes her head, trying to push her embarrassment down. She clears her throat. "I think... I have an idea of what it is, but I won't know for sure until lunch time. I will tell you when I find out."

Madoka turns back to her, cheeks still warm, and smiles. "Good. Thank you, Homura-chan. Let's hurry up and catch up to Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan."

Her hand automatically reaches for Homura's and she threads their fingers together.

Homura still finds it embarrassing, but she also doesn't really mind all that much.

\\

Hitomi takes a deep breath and glances over to Sayaka.

"Sayaka-san—"

"Morning, Sayaka-chan, Hitomi-chan!"

They both turn to see Madoka and Homura approaching.

"Morning, Madoka. Transfer student," Sayaka nods.

"Good morning, Madoka-san, Akemi...-san..." Hitomi gasps. "Y-You two...! I knew it! The both of you!"

"Uhm? H-Hitomi-chan?" Madoka looks around nervously at the other students walking by who are watching them curiously.

"A forbidden relationship!" Hitomi points at their hands.

Madoka blushes, but stops Homura from pulling away. "We're just holding hands, Hitomi-chan. T-There's nothing wrong with that! We used to hold hands all the time!"

Sayaka looks at her, sly expression on her face. "Yeah, but you haven't done that in a while, Madoka. I bet you only want to do that with transfer student~"

Hitomi's eyes widen. Thinking quickly, Madoka drops her bag, and suddenly reaches out to grab Sayaka's hand.

"Nope, I don't mind holding yours either, Sayaka-chan." There's a forced smile on Madoka's face as she squeezes Sayaka's hand, hard.

Sayaka winces. "M-Madoka, you—o—ow!" she pulls her hand away. "Sheesh! When did you get so strong?" she mutters to herself.

"Anyways," Madoka tugs Homura closer before picking up her bag. "There's nothing wrong with holding hands! We should continue walking or else we're going to be late!"

For once, Madoka takes the lead, dragging Homura with her.

Hitomi stares after them.

Sayaka stops walking when she realizes Hitomi isn't following. "Uh, Hitomi? We should go too."

"A-Ah," Hitomi blinks as if waking and nods slowly. "Y-Yes... Of course, Sayaka-san."

They quickly catch up and walk as pairs towards school.

"...I hope the test isn't too difficult today," Hitomi comments once she's finally past Madoka's and Homura's linked hands.

As one, Madoka and Sayaka both turn to her.

"T-Test?" Madoka stammers out, eyes widening.

Likewise, Sayaka starts panicking. "There's a test today!?"

It's a reminder that life, and school, is continuing on even with the existence of witches.

Hitomi nods. "Yes. Math. Yamaguchi-sensei reminded us the other day...?"

"Oh my gosh." Sayaka starts floundering about. "H-Hitomi! Lend me your notes! If I fail another one my mom is going to ground me!"

Just thoughts of her angry mother make her shudder; she'd rather face a witch any day. Her recent missed curfews weren't doing her any favours, and another failed test would definitely push the limits.

A part of her can't help but think how pointless school is, but another part latches onto this semblance of normalcy that she hasn't felt in a while.

"Homura-chan!" Madoka turns to the other girl. "D-Did you know there's a test today?"

To her surprise, Homura shakes her head; test days always changed no matter what timeline, and it had completely slipped her mind.

"No," Homura tells her. "But I am exempt from taking any tests until my third week."

Madoka stares at her in confusion, before she realizes that it hasn't even been that long since Homura had transferred in. After everything that had happened, it had felt like *months*.

"Madoka!"

Madoka turns and finds Sayaka and Hitomi are way ahead of them now.

"Hurry up! I wanna get to school fast and see if I can look over Hitomi's notes!"

"A-Ah!" Madoka quickly runs after her, pulling Homura with her. "W-Wait, Sayaka-chan! Let me see them too!"

"I think you will do fine, Madoka," Homura says to her as she follows obediently. "Unlike Miki Sayaka, you seem to retain your information better. You were also able to finish most of your homework on your own after I explained to you the correct formulas to use. As long as you remember the steps correctly, you will be fine."

Madoka glances at her, slightly out of breath, and slows down her pace. "Y-You think so, Homura-chan?"

Homura nods, absently noting how her own quickened pulse is now out of sync with the second one.

She turns her attention back to Madoka. "Yes. You will be fine."

Madoka returns to a normal walk, glancing at Homura out of the corner of her eye.

"Thanks, Homura-chan."

Slightly distracted, Homura tilts her head at her in confusion. "...Hm? I was merely stating the obvious."

Madoka smiles lightly. "For... a lot of things, Homura-chan."

She grips her hand tighter as they continue on their way to school.

/

"That's it, my life is over." Face planted on her desk, Sayaka can only remember her alarmingly white test paper. "Goodbye freedom..." She sits up suddenly, and turns to Madoka who is now taking out two bentous. "Madoka! How did you do?"

Madoka jumps slightly, and her eyes dart nervously around the room. "Uhm... o-okay, I guess."

"What!" Sayaka points at her. "You traitor! How do you even find time to study? Especially this weekend? We were so busy—" she cuts herself off when she realizes that she's shouting, and that Hitomi is looking at her curiously. She clears her throat. "A-Anyways, usually you don't even understand this stuff. When did you suddenly get so smart?"

Madoka frowns. "I—"

"Madoka is smarter than you," Homura interrupts. They turn to look at her. "In a number of ways."

Sayaka glares but Homura is already moving away.

Madoka quickly calls out to her. "H-Homura-chan?"

Homura stops and turns back to Madoka. "Yes, Madoka?"

"Uhm. You're only going to get milk, right?"

She nods.

"And *only* milk, right?"

She nods once more.

Madoka stares at her, hard, and Homura finally flinches.

"*Only* milk," Madoka tells her.

Homura nods, eyes suddenly looking nervous. "O-Only milk," she repeats.

"Good. Don't take too long."

"O-Okay." She quickly rushes out the door before Madoka can change her mind.

Madoka sighs, and turns to find Hitomi and Sayaka staring at her.

"It's nothing." She stands, hands grasping two bentous. "Let's go meet Mami-san!"

She doesn't wait for them and heads over to the door.

Sayaka shakes her head, grabbing her own lunch.

"We should follow. Hitomi? Uh... Hitomi?"

Sayaka snaps her fingers in front of the girl's face who blinks, startled.

"O-Oh. Y-Yes, we should go too, Sayaka-san..."

/

"Yo."

Sayaka can only stare, but after flunking her test, she finds she's just not in the mood to deal with a certain volatile red-head. She ignores her, and takes a seat on the far edge of their usual bench.

Kyouko raises an eyebrow, annoyed at being written off.

"Is she a friend of yours, Madoka-san?" Hitomi interrupts as she gives the stranger a puzzled look; she isn't dressed in a uniform which means she isn't a student here. As a class representative, Hitomi is required to help enforce certain rules, and a non-student visiting during school hours fell into that category.

"U-Uhm," Madoka glances at Hitomi nervously before she looks at Mami for help.

"...She is an acquaintance of mine, Shizuki-san," Mami answers for Madoka. "I apologize on her behalf for her showing up here despite it being against the rules," she

offers an apologetic smile to the green eyes that flicker to her direction. "She only recently moved to Mitakihara, and her papers are still being processed, hence why she's not in uniform. No doubt she is feeling lonely since her transfer isn't set yet, and she has no one else to visit at this time."

"Ah," Hitomi processes the information. "So she will be attending this school?"

Mami nods in agreement.

"I see," Hitomi gives Mami a polite smile. "Then there shouldn't be any problems here. However," she glances at Kyouko, "she should be more careful until she gets her uniform."

Kyouko gives her a devilish grin. "No worries, I have no intention of getting caught as long as someone keeps their mouth shut."

The threat hangs in the air and Hitomi blinks in response, obviously not used to the less than subtle words thrown at her.

"Sakura-san," Mami warns her. Kyouko shrugs, before she plops down besides Sayaka.

"Hey, your bentou looks pretty good. Gimme some," she demands.

Sayaka narrows her eyes and deliberately turns away.

"Hey!" Kyouko doubles her efforts to snatch something from Sayaka.

"S-Sorry, Hitomi-chan," Madoka apologizes for Kyouko's rudeness.

Hitomi merely shakes her head as she starts unpacking her bentou. She finds it strange really, about these new additions to their group. While she can understand why Homura has joined them, the circumstances to Sayaka and Madoka meeting Mami are still vague to her. Now, there's another addition, and somehow it makes her feel like she's getting replaced.

Before she can dwell on it though, the mysterious, uniformless, soon to be transfer student, turns to Madoka and her words has Hitomi curious.

"Hey Pinkie, where's Kitty Cat?"

Kitty Cat.

There is it again, that nickname for Homura.

Hitomi chances a glance to Sayaka, and then to Kyouko.

She can't help but wonder—

"Homura-chan? She went to get drinks," Madoka replies as she places the two bentous she's carrying down onto the bench. Kyouko immediately notices and her eyes widen.

"Hey—two bentous? Mind if I take one off of you?" Without waiting for Madoka to reply, agile hands reach for top box. In a very rare act of aggression and to everyone's surprise, Madoka immediately slaps her hand away.

It's not enough to hurt, but Kyouko glares at her while Madoka looks almost embarrassed.

"S-Sorry, Kyouko-chan, but that's Homura-chan's bentou... You can have some of mine though?" Madoka offers the other box to Kyouko who raises an eyebrow. She shrugs it off; free food is free food after all.

When Homura finally arrives, arms laden with usual milk boxes, she immediately notices Kyouko sitting next to Madoka, and already knows what has happened.

"Madoka, you can have some of my bentou," Homura tells her as she hands her a strawberry milk.

"Thanks, Homura-chan," she murmurs as she accepts the drink.

"Hey, thanks," Kyouko says at the same time as she snatches a milk from Homura's collection—or tries to anyway.

Homura has a tight hold on Kyouko's wrist. "This is mine."

"You have plenty!" Kyouko protests, but Homura doesn't let go.

Her eyes narrow. "*Mine*."

Madoka places a placating hand on Homura's arm. "Homura-chan, it's okay, I'll just give Kyouko-chan mine."

Lavender eyes flicker to Madoka and then to Kyouko. She glares and offers Kyouko a box of regular milk. "Only one."

"Thanks," Kyouko grins. "Knew it was a good idea to come visit."

Hitomi glances at the agitated looking Homura, to the depressed Sayaka, and then to the frown on Mami's face, and can't help but think otherwise.

/

Homura finishes two milk boxes before she turns to Mami. "Tomoe Mami."

Mid bite, Mami covers her mouth and swallows politely. "Yes, Akemi-san?"

"...May I see your hand for a moment?"

"Ah?" Mami blinks at her in confusion as Madoka does the same.

"Briefly." She notices their stares. "Please."

"A-Alright, Akemi-san." Mami holds out her left hand to her. Homura takes it, turning it around so that her palm faces up. Her thin fingers then press the area right where the wrist and hand connect.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka eyes her curiously.

Homura lets go with a nod. "Thank you. I just needed to confirm something. I will tell you later." She says this for Madoka's benefit, a quick eye flickering to Hitomi in explanation and Mami and Madoka immediately understand.

"Alright." Mami turns back to her lunch.

Homura finally turns to her own bentou—only to find that Kyouko is now picking through that. She grits her teeth, fighting down her hiss.

"Sakura Kyouko."

Madoka and Mami look at Kyouko just as she's dropping another piece of karaage into her mouth.

"This is delicious," Kyouko responds.

Madoka quickly reaches out to keep Homura from lunging at her, and Mami immediately starts reprimanding Kyouko.

\\

Hitomi glances over to Sayaka, before her eyes move over to the other four; they're busy arguing, and she knows this is the best time.

She takes a calming breath and exhales slowly, eyes serious as she turns to Sayaka.

"Sayaka-san."

"Hm?" Mouth full of rice, she turns to Hitomi. She swallows. "What's up, Hitomi?"

Hitomi stares straight at her. "You didn't answer my messages yesterday. Or my phone calls. Did you not get them?"

Sayaka swallows once more, though this time it's of her own guilt.

Seeing Hitomi's messages right after finding out that Kyousuke had been discharged without her knowing—had been more than she could handle and she had promptly deleted them.

"I didn't," she lies instead, glad that her voice doesn't crack. "I'm sorry, Hitomi, I've been having some problems with my phone lately. I'm taking it into the shop sometime this week to get another one..."

Hitomi remains staring, eyes searching for the truth in her words. Sayaka has no idea what she sees and tries hard not to look away.

Hitomi sighs. "I see... then, you really didn't know?"

"What?" Sayaka blinks in confusion.

"Your parents... didn't tell you?"

"Oh, uh...I was... kind of busy, this weekend... I didn't really get a chance to see them..." That was true, at least.

"I see. That... is rather unfortunate."

Sayaka stares at her. "What are you talking about, Hitomi?"

Hitomi glances at her and sighs once more. "Kamijou-kun was released from the hospital yesterday."

"A-Ah..." Sayaka scratches her head, feigning ignorance. "W-was he?"

Hitomi nods. "Yes. I only know because we attend the same music school, and my piano instructor informed me of this on Saturday..."

"O-Oh?"

"Yes... They... set up a small congratulatory party for him yesterday. It was a very small gathering; mostly family, close friends, staff at the hospital and his instructors from the school."

Sayaka feels her stomach drop.

"I thought you would have known... Your parents at least...?"

Sayaka grips her bentou tightly. "I... didn't see them all weekend... I didn't... I didn't know..."

She had arrived home late on Saturday; left early on Sunday. Ignored their calls, not wanting to face the consequences yet. Things had been tense this morning, but *she didn't know*.

"Sayaka-san...?"

"Did... did you go, Hitomi...?"

Hitomi hesitates. "...Yes, I was invited last minute... Our fathers attended the same university, if you remember..."

Sayaka closes her eyes. "H-How... how was he...?"

"...He was doing really well. The staff kept talking about how his recovery was so miraculous. His body is completely healed with no complications..."

The news makes Sayaka's heart beat faster; she can't fight down how happy that makes her.

"He... played."

Sayaka opens her eyes and turns to Hitomi.

"Ave Maria..."

Sayaka smiles softly. "Really?"

"Yes. It was... really beautiful."

The smile drops from Sayaka's face as she notices Hitomi's expression.

She swallows down the gnawing fear. "Did... did he... ask about me?"

Hitomi glances at her. "He... told me what happened last week, when you visited him. What he said to you. He... figured you were still upset, which is why you didn't attend..."

Sayaka's heart thunders loudly in her ears. "N-No... I didn't know! T-There's no way I'd be upset with him!"

"Sayaka-san?"

Sayaka shakes her head, trying to fight down the panic. "N-Nothing. Thanks, for telling me, Hitomi."

Hitomi looks at her. "Sayaka-san?"

That questioning gaze. Sayaka wonders exactly how much Kyousuke told her. Wonders what Hitomi knows.

Sayaka gives her a lopsided smile. "Really. Thanks." She quickly turns back to her bentou and stuffs as much food into her mouth as possible.

Hitomi knows this is a sign that she's done talking, and turns to finish her own.

/

Homura notices it; that subtle change in Sayaka as the darkness in her heart slowly starts to grow.

What had happened?

The why... was always tied to Kamijou Kyousuke.

And the how, was most likely Shizuki Hitomi; she had seen them talking during lunch.

As soon as break hits and Sayaka remains sitting with her head in her arms on her desk, Homura approaches her.

"Miki Sayaka."

Sayaka does not respond.

"Maybe some fresh air will make you feel better," Homura tells her.

Sayaka knows she means something else.

'Maybe a grief seed will make you feel better.'

Sayaka raises her head and she can see Homura moving closer. She sees that bony hand reaching over to grab her arm. As soon as she feels the contact, she's not sure what happens, just that something deep in her heart twists and projects outwards. Homura immediately flinches away in fear and surprise, barely managing to keep her ears and tail hidden from the surge of magic.

"S-Sayaka-chan?"

Madoka's voice wakes her from her vindictive thoughts. And horror washes over as she realizes what she had been trying to do.

Her body shakes and suddenly she can't be here anymore. Can't be in the same room as Hitomi. As Homura. As Madoka. She stands abruptly and bolts out the door.

"Sayaka-chan!" Madoka calls after her, torn between giving chase, or making sure that Homura is okay.

"I'll go after her, Madoka-san!" Hitomi decides for her and quickly runs to the door. She's holding out her phone to Madoka, showing her she will message her when she finds Sayaka, and then she's gone.

The other students can only stare in confusion at the sudden commotion.

There's murmurs around them, and Madoka gives a nervous laugh. She quickly turns back to Homura.

"Are you alright, Homura-chan?" she asks her softly.

Homura nods. "I'm fine, Madoka."

Madoka blinks and places her hands on Homura's cheeks, forcing her to look at her. "Are you sure?"

Homura blushes lightly, hyper aware of the others in the room and nods once more. "Y-Yes."

Satisfied with her answer, Madoka removes her hands.

"Did...Sayaka-chan do something...?"

She hadn't felt it of course, but when Homura had reached over to grab Sayaka, she had seen the look on Sayaka's face.

Homura nods hesitantly. "Madoka, you need to message Tomoe Mami and inform her that Miki Sayaka is currently... unstable."

Madoka quickly pulls out her phone and does as told.

\\

"Sayaka-san."

With nowhere else to run, Sayaka's legs had lead her back up to the empty roof. She now stands with her back facing Hitomi as she tries to calm her emotions.

It's not working—especially not once she hears that voice. All she can think is that everything is Hitomi's fault.

If only Hitomi never existed—the thought draws a painful gasp from Sayaka, and she brings her hands to grip her head.

No...No she doesn't—i—it's not Hitomi's fault—Hitomi doesn't even like Kyousuke—at least, she didn't think so. Hitomi had smiled—wished her good luck—Hitomi...Hitomi...

Sayaka can't think clearly and her knees give out under her.

Hitomi...and Kyousuke... whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy—

"Sayaka-san!" Hitomi rushes over to Sayaka's side, and places a hand on her shoulders. "Sayaka-san! Are you ill? What's wrong?"

Her hand is slapped away as Sayaka growls at her.

"*Getawaygetawayfromme*!"

"Sayaka-san...?" Hitomi can only reel back at the hatred thrown at her. "W-What's wrong, Sayaka-san?"

"*...everything...isyourfault...*" Sayaka mutters as a shadow passes over her face.

Hitomi shivers as she feels the temperature around them drop suddenly.

"Sayaka-san! Please—!" a hand on her shoulder drops her heart to her stomach, and Hitomi turns scared eyes to find a familiar face peering at her.

"Tomoe..-san...?"

Mami gives her a smile. "Please, Shizuki-san, let me handle this."

Hitomi wants to rebuke—Sayaka is her friend and she will help her—but the warm hand on her shoulder tightens. She finds herself easily pulled to her feet.

"Break is almost over, Shizuki-san. You need to get to class. Please."

Her mouth opens to protest, but the look on Mami's face suddenly seems not so friendly. The chill around them seems to have increased, and she can only remember Sayaka's harsh words.

She nods.

A glance back, and then she's dazedly walking down the stairs just as the bell chimes; she's late for class.

As soon as Hitomi is gone, Mami turns to Sayaka.

"Miki-san!" Mami quickly pulls the grief seed from her pocket, and kneels before the other girl. "Please, your soul gem—you need to—!"

Sayaka knocks the grief seed from her hands and turns blank eyes towards her.

"Mami-san...why..."

Why are you here?

The area around them distorts. Mami only has a moment to react—she reaches out and slaps Sayaka, hard enough to send her tumbling to the floor.

It's enough—and the world stops turning.

"Miki-san! Please!" Mami has tears in her eyes. She quickly retrieves the grief seed that is lying a small distance away. "Please, Miki-san. Your soul gem—we need to clean it."

Hands grip and shake her roughly and somehow—somehow, Sayaka hears her. She summons her soul gem into her unsteady hands. Mami's own hands are shaking as she presses the seed to the darkened jewel. Her stomach drops when nothing happens. But she remembers Homura's words—as long as that link doesn't break—

"Please, please please..." Mami begs with a small sob. "Please, Miki-san, you can't give up. Sayaka!" She grips their hands tighter as Sayaka stares, recognizing her name, and seemingly confused that the other girl is crying for her.

"Mami...-san..." Sayaka shudders as the grief seed manages to pull a bit of darkness away. Mami watches with relief as it draws more and more away.

When it's full, Mami pulls out another one until Sayaka's gem is finally clean.

"Miki-san?" Mami finishes storing the used grief seeds in the usual tin container. She turns to the other girl who is now lying on the floor.

"...I'm such a fool..." Miki whispers softly, eyes staring blankly into the deceptively blue sky.

"...Come, Miki-san, let me escort you to the nurse's office."

\\

As soon as the coast is clear, Homura gathers Madoka in her arms and the smaller girl reflexively wraps her arms around Homura's neck. The now transformed girl starts to hop from roof to roof as she starts searching for Sayaka.

Mami had sent Madoka a text telling her that she had taken Sayaka to the nurse's office, and they were in the middle of class when Sayaka's signature had suddenly starting moving until she had disappeared.

And Sayaka is now nowhere to be found.

Hitomi had insisted to help search, and they had split up to cover more ground.

"Hitomi-chan is searching the cafe we usually go to, while Mami-san is searching around the mall... Homura-chan, do you feel Sayaka-chan anywhere?"

"Mm.."

Homura lands in a crouch on top of one of the highrise buildings in downtown. Madoka glances down—before considering that a bad idea and instead focuses on looking up at Homura's face: her brow is furrowed and there's a slight frown.

If they weren't so high up, Madoka would be tempted to try and ease the lines of worry away.

Ears twitch, and Homura expands her barrier trying to find lingering traces of magic in the air.

"Ah." It's faint, but she thinks she feel Sayaka's magic towards the northeast. "Hold on tight, Madoka." It's the only warning given, and Madoka does as told as they're suddenly airbourne once more, darting quickly through the cityscape.

/

"Where are we headed, anyways?" Sayaka asks even as her feet continue to follow wherever Kyouko is leading them. "The witch is that way..." Sayaka points out as the light from her gem grows dimmer the further they step away.

"It's fine; that witch will still be there when we're done," Kyouko waves off her worries and instead offers her some pocky. "Want some?"

It's automatic now, she accepts it, and distractedly eats the snack as Kyouko does the same.

"We're going to a place where we can find salvation for your lost soul."

Sayaka blinks and raises an eyebrow. "Yeah? And why do you think I need salvation."

"Heh," Kyouko turns to offer her a wicked grin. "You're gonna say that, when not too long ago I found you hacking and slashing at some familiars like they murdered your best friend?"

The irritation Sayaka feels dissipates as she keeps pace with Kyouko. Taking her silence as agreement, Kyouko nods and gestures to the desolate area in front of them.

"It's not too far from here," she tells her as the concrete path slowly branches out to dirt and places long abandoned.

Sayaka has no idea where they're at, but the looming black building up ahead reminds her that they're not quite in Mitakihara anymore.

\\

"It's okay, Hitomi-chan, you can just leave the rest to us," Madoka says through the phone.

Homura tilts her head curiously, but can assume that Hitomi has to bail out early due to her busy schedule.

"Yes, don't worry, I'll text you as soon as we find her. Okay...sure...no, really, it's fine, Hitomi-chan... okay... see you tomorrow. Bye."

Madoka hangs up and turns to deliver the news to Homura. "Hitomi-chan's parents called her asking where she was since she was supposed to be home for her ballet lessons."

Homura nods. "It's fine. I have an idea to where Miki Sayaka is headed."

Madoka pockets her phone and looks at Homura in worry. "Do you think Sayaka-chan is okay? S-She's not..." her voice trails off, not willing to voice her thoughts.

To her relief, Homura shakes her head.

"No...at least not yet."

Madoka stiffens at the not quite encouraging words.

"It's alright," Homura reassures her. "If we're headed where I think we're going, Miki Sayaka is not alone."

Madoka blinks, but walks closer to Homura and lets the girl lift her up again; being held by Homura is comforting and she readjusts her grip before looking up at her expectantly.

"Sakura Kyouko is with her, I believe," Homura tells her.

"Kyouko-chan? Did they meet up somehow?"

Homura thinks for a moment. "They seem to always find each other without meaning to," is all she says, before she leaps into the air again.

Madoka pulls herself closer to Homura as they soar across the sky.

She hopes that Sayaka is okay.

/

"A church?"

Sayaka looks around at the dilapidated building, and winces when she steps through a rotten floor board. Her foot is stuck, prompting Kyouko to help her out, before continuing to walk further inside.

"Watch your step," she tells her and Sayaka rolls her eyes.

"Kind of late for that..." she mutters as they walk past the rows of rotten and broken pews.

They climb a long set of stairs, until they reach a small podium that has seen better days.

Kyouko holds out her arms. "Welcome to my home."

Sayaka can't help but stare at Kyouko. She then glances to the ruins surrounding them; even the stained glass windows are cracked and dull.

"Before you say anything, you asked me earlier why I thought you needed to seek salvation. Simple, really. As magical girls who will eventually become the things we seek to destroy, isn't our very existence a sin?"

Sayaka frowns. She's not very religious and Kyouko holds out a hand.

"Relax, I'm not gonna try and convert you or anything," she tells her as she grins. She absently pulls out her box of pocky and eats a stick as Sayaka watches her expectantly.

"So, why are we here then?"

Kyouko shakes her head and throws her another rueful grin. "You know, I really meant it when I said we're pretty similar. Or at least, we used to be. I was once idealistic like you—ignorant about the real world, thinking that I could actually make a difference as long as I tried hard enough."

Sayaka looks at Kyouko, finding her eyes distant and her face drawn; she suddenly seems a lot older.

"I'm sure Mami warned you about making a wish for someone else, didn't she?"

Sayaka hesitantly nods.

"Heh," there's no humor in Kyouko's voice as she stares at something above them. Sayaka follows her gaze and her eyes widen as she sees a piece of rope tied to the support beams. "I made a wish for someone else," she nods to the rope that's lightly swaying in the breeze, "and that's the price I had to pay for my ignorance." Crimson eyes swivel to Sayaka's. "The thing about wishes, is that the miracle created also creates an equal amount of despair. Which makes sense now that I know where witches come from."

Kyouko sighs and takes a seat, legs stretched out in front of her.

"The problem with your wish though, is that the despair created is obviously too much for you to handle. Your potential as a magical girl is lacking. I'd say you barely even meet the minimum or something, and the miracle you wished for... was way beyond your power. "

Sayaka crosses her arms across her chest wanting to deny everything—but she can't.

"What did you wish for?" Sayaka asks instead.

Kyouko finishes her box of pocky and tosses it haphazardly into the area behind them. "You sure you wanna know? It's not a happy story," she gestures to the rope.

Sayaka walks over and takes a seat next to her. "...I would like to know."

Kyouko smirks and digs through her jacket pockets, before pulling out another box of pocky.

"Alright. But don't say I didn't warn you."

She rips open the box, and lays open the story close to her heart.

/

Now that they're closer, Homura can easily detect Sayaka and Kyouko's magical signatures inside the building. She places Madoka down and the smaller girl looks around in curiosity.

"Where are we?" she asks as she stares at the unfamiliar area.

"Close to the border of Kazamino and Mitakihara," Homura answers.

"Ah!" Madoka recognizes the city name immediately. "Isn't that where Mami-san said that Kyouko-chan was stationed?"

Homura nods. "Yes. Sakura Kyouko's hometown is Kazamino. This area is actually a part of the Sakura church grounds," Homura tells her as she points to a building further up ahead.

"Sakura Church? Kyouko-chan's family...?"

Homura stares at the distance and solemnly shakes her head. "No one lives here anymore."

"A-Ah..." Madoka senses the somber mood and reaches out to grab Homura's hand. "I-Is Sayaka-chan inside then?" Madoka asks instead.

Homura nods again. "Yes. Sakura Kyouko is also there."

"Will they be okay...?"

"For now. You should message Tomoe Mami and Shizuki Hitomi that we found her."

Madoka glances to the church and nods. "Okay."

Homura thinks for a moment. "Send Miki Sayaka a message as well—that there are people searching for her. I should also look into getting Sakura Kyouko a phone..."

Madoka lets go of Homura's hand and takes out her phone. She pauses as she looks at Homura. "Homura-chan, do you not like using phones?"

Most of the time Homura has Madoka either calling or messaging; she's curious.

Homura blinks, but shakes her head. "It's just faster to have you type everything out."

Madoka hums an uncommitted noise as she easily sends three messages in quick succession. "Where should I also tell Mami-san to meet us at?"

"We'll go back to grab our bags—" Homura blinks as she hears Madoka's stomach growl.

Madoka reaches for her stomach and blushes. "Ehehe, all that worrying has made me hungry..."

"...Message Tomoe Mami and ask her if she would like to grab something to eat."

Madoka gives Homura a sheepish smile, and types out the message with ease. "Okay, done."

"Alright, we should head back."

Madoka nods and places her phone back into her pocket. She holds her arms out to Homura with a grin. "Personal kitty transport."

Now that she knows that Sayaka is safe, for now, Madoka can finally relax.

Homura averts her eyes, suddenly embarrassed, but all the same she gathers Madoka in her arms once more. Arms loop around her neck and she glances down to the smaller girl.

"Ready?"

"Mmhmm."

And then they're off.

Inside the church, Kyouko notices Homura's signature fade away and smirks to herself.

AN: whew. That Sayaka. Anyways, thanks you people for all your encouraging words :) I will definitely try and finish, but... well, let me just tell you I've never actually finished a multi-chapter fic before and so far this is the longest one I've ever made. So, if I stop updating for like a month, that means I've abandoned it. Abandoned this site maybe. Haha. Let's hope MadoHomu can hold my attention for some more months hm? If it doesn't, well...

Anyways, thanks again for reading/reviewing :)) Love hearing input!

Chapter 17: time

"...Still, I should have kept a closer eye on her and insisted on staying. There was only one more class left... I should have put my foot down and stayed." Mami shakes her head, hand to her chin as she laments on her carelessness. "I'm relieved that Sakura-san somehow found her, but I can't imagine what would've happened if she didn't. I—"

"Mami-san," Madoka holds out a hand to stop her tirade. The blonde has been going in circles, blaming herself for Sayaka's disappearance. "It wasn't your fault. You saved Sayaka-chan; if it wasn't for you, Sayaka-chan wouldn't have even been able to walk away. She would've been—"

Madoka cuts herself off.

It reminds her how close she had been to losing her best friend, and her stomach churns uneasily.

Sensing the drop in mood, Mami gives her a nervous smile.

"Yes, and I am glad that Miki-san is okay."

Madoka looks up to warm yellow eyes. "Me too, Mami-san. Thank you."

The gratitude she can feel from Madoka's words, the honest relief she can see in those pink eyes, make Mami finally relax.

"I would do the same to help any of you girls," she tells Madoka.

They share a smile, conversation dropping to a comfortable silence.

Madoka leans back against the bench, eyes taking in the peaceful sight surrounding them.

After picking up their bags, they had met Mami nearby, and had been on their way to the mall to grab a quick bite to eat. Halfway there, the curious sight of a large crowd gathered in one of the larger parks downtown had drawn their attention.

More walking, until they finally spotted the large colourful advertisement screens: a new crepe cart had recently opened and crepes were currently 35% off.

Madoka's stomach had rumbled at the smell of food, Homura had heard, and Mami had nodded in agreement.

With a clear view of the long line, Homura had volunteered to place their orders. After much reassurance she'd be fine by herself, Madoka and Mami went on a search for somewhere to sit in the very busy park.

From kids to their parents, other students and older couples, empty spots were very hard to come by. Somehow, Mami's sharp eyes had narrowed in a bench that was clearing, and they had promptly snagged it for themselves.

"Will Homura-chan be able to find us with all these people...?" Madoka asks, looking around in worry.

"Yes," Mami nods at her. "That's one advantage she has over other people: she just has to follow my signature and she'll be able to pinpoint our location easily."

"Ahh, right.. How could I forget that?" Madoka shakes her head at her absent mindedness.

"Not to mention," Mami continues as Madoka looks at her. "I highly doubt she wouldn't be able to find where you are, Kaname-san. Cats have heightened senses; they're able to track scents just as easily as dogs."

"Does Homura-chan really have a higher sense of smell though?" Madoka wonders out loud. "I never really see her sniffing anything..."

Mami appears thoughtful. "Well, we do know her animal traits make her more sensitive to magic. As for her cat-like behaviors... She has higher agility, and can definitely leap higher, even without adding magic..."

Madoka glances around, slightly worried about eavesdroppers, but finds the park is a loud chatter of background noise. Another wink from Mami eases her worries.

"Mm, she also likes milk. A lot." Madoka shakes her head at just how much milk Homura can consume in one day. "Meat, too..."

Mami nods. "And is prone to chasing small animals..."

Madoka sighs at that, to Mami's amusement. "Yes. Unfortunately."

"Hmm," Mami taps her chin with a finger. "Has she scratched up any furniture?"

Madoka definitely notices the smile on Mami's lips.

"No, she hasn't," she tells her. "Let's see, what else... she purrs if you scratch her ears... or if she's content at something..."

"And hisses if she doesn't like something," Mami notes, briefly thinking of Kyuubey, before she squashes that down.

Madoka grins. "She also has trouble waking up in the mornings. She always buries herself into the blanket."

Mami can definitely imagine that. "Oh. She likes to rub her face against you, Kaname-san. That's a clear sign of her marking you with her scent."

Madoka blushes. "M-Mami-san..."

The mischievous side of Mami continues on. "Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if—"

"Homura-chan!" Madoka sits up when she somehow notices the dark-haired girl approaching, even with the large crowd surrounding them.

Mami smiles to herself; Madoka will probably find out what she was about to tell her, sooner or later.

Homura easily navigates towards them, three crepes in hand.

When she finally arrives, she gives Madoka her strawberry crepe, and Mami her coffee cream crepe.

"What did you end up choosing, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, scooting over to make space.

"Chicken teriyaki," Homura answers, taking the spot next to Madoka. "To make up for the karaage Sakura Kyouko ate from my bentou."

Madoka nods. "I'll ask Papa if he can make more tonight. Mm, I haven't had crepes in a while! This looks really good. No wonder the line was so long."

"It moved pretty quickly," Homura says absently, fingers already moving to tear away the paper surrounding the food. "A few customers held up the line when they were given incorrect orders. Once that was fixed, the wait was cut in half."

"Mm, this is actually quite delicious," Mami tells them, hand covering her mouth politely as she chews. "I rarely eat these kinds of desserts. Perhaps, I should remedy that."

Madoka glances over to Mami, mouth full, and nods in agreement. She quickly swallows.

"This is really good! Mami-san, would you like to try some?"

"Ah?" Mami looks over to Madoka, and barely manages to fight her grin down. "Actually, Kaname-san, maybe you should offer Akemi-san a bite first?"

"Hm?" Madoka blinks in confusion and turns to Homura, who has already finished her crepe. "Homura-chan! Were you that hungry? Did you want some of mine?"

Homura glances up as her hands crumple her trash. Madoka holds out the crepe to her, offering a bite. Wordlessly, Homura leans forward.

She completely bypasses the crepe however, and Madoka's eyes widen when she realizes how close their faces are. Homura completely ignores her blushing face, eyes concentrated on the side of Madoka's mouth. She proceeds to lick away the small bit of creme she had spotted.

Madoka freezes, face red, and Mami quickly catches her crepe as she drops it from her surprise.

"H-H-Homura-cha…n?"

Homura is pulling away when her eyes widen, finally realizing what she has done.

"Uh oh," Mami murmurs as she notices Homura's ears and tail pop out from her sudden embarrassment.

Madoka hears and quickly spots the familiar twitching ears. She pulls Homura close, hands covering the top of her head.

"Homura-chan! P-Put them away!"

There's a soft whine as Mami smiles to herself in amusement. There's no one really paying attention to them in the park; everyone's too busy working on their crepes.

Mami turns back to her own, while Homura struggles with her emotions, and Madoka struggles with Homura.

/

"Where are we going?"

Kyouko glances behind her, grin on her face. "Since we're here, let me take you to this great ramen place I used to drop by. Their spicy tonkotsu soup received a reward a few years back. It's like the place to try if you visit Kazamino."

Sayaka trails after her, still trying to process Kyouko's story, and how fast she can flip the switch from serious to devious in less than one second.

"Wait," Sayaka blinks suddenly as a thought occurs to her. "How are you paying for this...?" she asks, even though she knows the answer.

Kyouko holds up an arm, not even bothering to look at her. "Thanks."

Sayaka sighs, but it's more in resignation than anything.

\

Mami settles her teacup onto the coffee table, eyes moving to glance outside her balcony window.

Still fairly bright outside.

She sighs softly, looking across the table to where Madoka and Homura are sitting quietly.

Still obviously embarrassed by what had happened at the park.

Though, Mami finds it amusing that they're still sitting very close to one another.

She clears her throat, prompting the two embarrassed girls to finally look to her.

"Akemi-san, earlier, during lunch, you said you had something to explain to us?"

Homura nods, relief flooding her face as she welcomes the distraction. She summons her ears and tail.

"I noticed this morning, there was another heartbeat almost echoing my own," Homura tells them, presenting her black tail with that jagged line of yellow. "And, the only difference in my body, is this." She points to the yellow on her tail. "I believe, somehow, your magic has connected with mine, and somehow my link is able to pick up your link."

Mami blinks. "That... is very curious," she murmurs softly. "So the second heartbeat, is mine?"

Homura nods. "Yes. It is in sync with yours. I was checking this afternoon to confirm it."

"D-Does it... do anything?" Madoka asks, fighting down her bit of jealousy; she doesn't even know why she feels that way.

Homura tilts her head, hearing the tone in her voice, but not understanding what it is.

"I'm not sure," she answers. "It makes it easier for me to detect Tomoe Mami's signature though."

"Hmmm..." Mami stares at Homura's tail. "That is interesting. Linked links. If you were to add Sakura-san's magic, or Miki-san's magic, do you think it would do the same?"

Homura quickly hides her tail behind her back as her ears flatten.

"Ah," Mami holds out her hand, giving her a smile. "It was merely a question, Akemi-san."

Homura eyes her nervously until Madoka finally reaches over to place a hand on her back. That at least helps Homura to relax.

"Now that you bring up your tail, however," Mami continues, "I came up with a possible solution to help protect it while we fight."

Homura perks up at this information.

Mami summons her soul gem into her hands. "I think it can only really work for your tail, however. But, your ears are easier to protect?"

Homura nods, watching as Mami pulls out a yellow ribbon.

Mami proceeds to kneel in front of her. "May I see your tail, Akemi-san?"

Homura's ears twitch.

"Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs softly to her, voice coaxing.

She reluctantly shows it to her.

Mami is gentle as her magic loops and surrounds Homura's tail with her ribbons.

"It's not too tight, is it?" Mami asks her, letting go.

Homura shakes her head. She unconsciously starts flickering her tail from side to side, testing it.

Mami notices the frown on Homura's face. "How is it?"

"Strange," Homura tells her.

Truthfully, she doesn't like the ribbon at all. Her hands twitch as she struggles to keep herself from trying to rip it off.

Hand still on Homura's back, Madoka can feel how tense and agitated she is becoming.

"Ahh, Mami-san? Can you take them off please...? I don't think Homura-chan likes them."

Mami quickly unwinds it, granting her a sigh of relief from Homura.

"I suppose that won't work then..." Mami comments with a frown. "It would've been ideal, since I could focus my magic on it and my ribbons are quite sturdy."

Homura unconsciously leans against Madoka. "A stronger barrier would be nice. It's too bad my control is lacking in that department."

Mami hums softly. "Actually, may I see your tail once more, Akemi-san?"

Homura looks at her. "Do you have something in mind?"

Mami smiles at her, trying to seem mysterious. "Kind of."

Homura remains staring.

Mami clears her throat. "Well, I was thinking, since my magic is a part of your tail, perhaps there's a way I can manipulate it?"

Homura tilts her head, curious, and presents Mami her tail once more.

Mami holds it with one hand, placing her other right above the golden line. "My magic is already fused with your tail, but it's obviously still connected to me if you're able to sense my heartbeat... Therefore, technically, I should be able to control it, and reinforce your tail with my own."

Madoka moves closer to see what Mami is doing.

They watch as Mami struggles to move the line—and is surprised when a small part of it shifts, eliciting a small gasp from Homura.

Mami stops, quickly looking at her. "I'm sorry, Akemi-san. Did that hurt?"

Homura shakes her head. "N-No," she suppresses a shudder. "I-It just felt really strange..."

Like small needles painfully prickling along her soul.

"Hm." Mami lowers her hand with another frown. "Perhaps, we should find another way?"

Homura stops her. "N-No. Uhm. I should be fine. If this works, it will benefit me more in the long run..."

"Are you sure, Akemi-san?"

Homura nods firmly. "Yes. It's fine."

Mami turns to Madoka, as if asking for her permission.

"...You can hold onto me, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her softly.

Homura swallows nervously. "I am fine, Madoka."

Mami and Madoka share a look, before the blonde nods and continues her task.

It's a very slow process, as she has to manipulate her own magic against Homura's.

The line is slowly branching out when Homura bites back a gasp, fingers digging into her palms to try and ignore the pain.

In fact, she's visibly shaking. Madoka pulls her close.

"Just hold onto me, Homura-chan," she whispers softly into her ear.

Arms encircle Madoka's small waist as Homura buries her face into her neck.

Mami continues her arduous task, pushing past the guilt she feels when Homura whimpers the more the magic is drawn away from its original location.

When lines are now covering half her tail, Mami stops and sits back in exhaustion.

"Whew, it's been a while since I've had to concentrate that hard on my magic," she tells them, hands reaching into her pockets to withdraw her handkerchief. She dabs at her forehead with the cloth.

Homura remains quiet, glad for the sudden reprieve. Madoka absently runs her hands across her ears as she turns to Mami.

"When's the last time you had to do something like that, Mami-san?" she asks curiously.

"Ahh," Mami gives her tired smile. "Well, it's rather embarrassing to say this, but, when I first became a magical girl, I was rather horrible at magic. I had no weapons except my ribbons, which I couldn't really use properly... It took quite a bit of time and effort to turn them into muskets. Even longer for me to make my ultimate weapon, 'Tiro Finale,' as well."

Madoka blinks in surprise. "R-Really? But, you seem like a natural, Mami-san."

Mami shakes her head. "No, I think if you met me back then..." her fingers tighten around her handkerchief unconsciously, "well, I'm sure you'd have a very different opinion of me."

Madoka stares at her, for the first time realizing she's starting to see the cracks in Mami's confident facade. Her face softens.

"I'm sure I would've liked you back then, too, Mami-san."

Mami looks up to find kind eyes on her. For some reason, her vision blurs and she realizes that tears have pooled. She quickly wipes them away in embarrassment.

"T-Thank you, Kaname-san."

Madoka nods, giving her a smile. "You know, I think we should do something about that, Mami-san."

"W-What?"

"We're friends, so can you stop addressing me so politely?"

"Kaname-san...?"

"'Kaname-san is what you'd call my parents,'" Madoka quotes as she keeps one hand on Homura's head, and holds out a finger to Mami. "My name is Kaname Madoka. Madoka is fine, Mami-chan."

Mami blinks. "I—"

"Yes, Mami-chan?"

The familiar suffix—has Mami choking down tears. It's a nickname she hasn't been called in a long time.

"U-Uh, Mami-san, I'm s-sorry! Don't cry!" Madoka quickly panics, unable to comfort Mami as Homura is more or less asleep against her.

She laughs softly. "N-No, it's not your fault, Kana—Madoka-chan," the name has Madoka smiling. "It's—it's just been a while since anyone has called me that. I-it feels nice. Like we're really friends."

"We are friends, Mami-chan," Madoka tells her. She absently scratches Homura's ears, earning her a soft purr. "I'm sure Homura-chan won't mind if you call her Homura-chan."

Said girl does not respond. Instead, she nuzzles Madoka's chin with her ears, before she turns away.

Mami smiles. "For some reason, I feel like 'Homura-chan' is something for you only, Madoka-chan." Mami thinks for a moment. "Perhaps, I will call her 'Akemi-chan?' It has a cute ring to it."

Madoka nods, grinning. "Definitely."

\\

"I don't get it..." Sayaka sighs out as she watches Kyouko dig into her second burger. "H-How..." she swallows hard. "How do you stand it...?"

Kyouko shrugs. "The best you can do," she tells her, mouth full, "is to find something to live for."

Sayaka watches as she stuffs a handful of fries in her mouth. She knows she should be disgusted at her lack of manners, but can't find the energy to care.

"What do you live for?" she asks instead.

Kyouko smirks and points to herself, before she washes down her food with a large gulp of soda.

"Myself, obviously. Everything I do is so that I can survive; I am my first priority."

"...Sounds pretty selfish to me," Sayaka points out.

"Yeah, and that's how it should be," Kyouko agrees. "We've already given up enough and we shouldn't have to live with any regrets; what's wrong with being selfish? You gotta be selfish in order to survive!"

"Huh." Sayaka thinks about it. "But, isn't that kind of a downward spiral? I mean, if I was being selfish—I'd want..." she mumbles something under her breath, "and because I can't... it keeps messing with my mind, and I keep falling apart." She shudders as she thinks to how close she had been to become a witch.

"Yeah, that's your problem right there. You gotta choose your battles. Me? Well, say I want to eat something. You think I'm gonna worry about not having enough money to buy something? Nope." Kyouko snaps her fingers. "I take it and I eat it. Done and done. Sometimes it's the small things that can get you through the day."

"Small things huh?" Sayaka sighs.

Kyouko points a fry at her. "Yup, but you gotta figure out what works for you. If you can't even do that, you might as well smash your soul gem right now. Save us all the trouble of having to fight you as a witch."

The fry disappears into her mouth as Sayaka frowns.

Kyouko shrugs, still chewing. "Like, Mami has her tea and her desserts, you know? She cooks and she distracts herself from things that way. Kitty Cat..." she swallows. "Hm. I don't know—she seems to really like milk, judging how close she was to scratching my face off when I tried to take one this afternoon. I'm guessing she also has an attachment to Pinkie too. Things like that; you gotta find whatever's gonna keep you grounded."

Sayaka won't admit it, but Kyouko's actually giving her really good advice.

Problem is, the person who keeps her grounded is also the person who's messing with her mind.

"I don't have anything like that..." Sayaka tells her.

Kyouko snaps her fingers in front of her face. "Oy. Stop that already. Everybody's got something—you just need to find yours. Like, I don't know, you got any hobbies you like?"

Sayaka blinks and sits up. "Baseball...I guess? Oh...and listening to classical music..."

After hearing about Kyousuke and Sayaka's wish, Kyouko waves her off. "The music thing—you're better off without. It's associated with Pretty Boy, which is something you

do not need. As for baseball...Ah." Kyouko grins at her. "This actually might work. You got some way to contact Kitty Cat?"

"Hm?" Sayaka scratches her head in confusion. She shrugs. "Well, I have Madoka's number, and since they're practically attached at the hip, it's the same thing."

"Yeah? Alright. I got a perfect way for you to keep your mind clear, and to help us with our 'teamwork' building or whatever."

Sayaka raises an eyebrow.

Kyouko pops the last piece of her burger into her mouth. "Maybe, we'll play some magical girl baseball."

It sounds utterly ridiculous and Sayaka tells her so.

"Nah, hear me out," Kyouko waves some fries around; her last batch. "We can make up our own rules and whatever, but the general gist is some type of baseball thing. You hit the ball, and you run—and we throw in some teamwork somehow."

Sayaka doesn't know why, but she can't help but laugh as she pictures the five of them playing some type of magical girl baseball.

"We don't even have enough people..." She points out.

"Technicalities. Listen, you message Pinkie to tell Kitty Cat about the idea—and don't forget to mention it's to keep you from turning all witchy on us—and then just sit back and let Kitty Cat make it work."

"What?" Sayaka frowns as she waits for her phone to turn on. "You want transfer student to be in charge of it?"

"Well, Kitty Cat's the thinker in our group, isn't she?"

Sayaka grumbles, but she can't disagree.

"Yeah. Kitty Cat can handle it. And if it ends up being super boring, then we'll just have to add in stuff to make it fun. Just thinking about it is even making me excited," Kyouko says as she grins.

Sayaka stares down at her phone, surprised by what's on her screen.

"Whoops..."

"Hm?"

Sayaka maneuvers the phone over so that Kyouko can see—she has around 20 missed calls and 30 text messages.

Kyouko points to the phone. "Small things, like that."

Sayaka can feel something in her heart unravel. She grips her phone tighter. "Small things, huh?"

"Yeah," Kyouko agrees. "Small things."

/

The sun has long since set, and this is already the second barrier disappearing; the second witch dead.

Homura looks down at her tail that is now speckled with miniscule yellow lines. The process had been more than uncomfortable, but the results should hopefully be worth it. Though she doesn't like to rely on Mami for support, the fact that she knows there's an extra barrier around her tail at least lessens her worries that something's going to chop it off.

It doesn't change their fighting tactics however, as she still remains by Madoka to offer her protection; it's just a small weight lifted from her shoulders.

Homura feels Madoka's gaze on her, prompting her to glance at her in question.

Madoka is catching her breath, absently staring at Homura though her eyes aren't exactly focused on her. When she notices Homura looking, she gives her a smile, automatically reaching for her hand.

"Does it still feel weird, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks her in between breaths.

Homura shakes her head as Mami walks over, grief seed resting in her open palm.

Homura looks around, the old abandoned factory is the perfect place for witches to camp in. In fact, she can already sense another one nearby.

This one is weaker, however.

"Akemi-chan?"

"There's a familiar close to here. It shouldn't take too long to destroy," she tells them when Mami stops in front of her.

"Ah." Mami nods in agreement. "Yes, that sounds like a good idea, Akemi-chan." She sighs and hands Homura the grief seed. "Here you go, Akemi-chan. I apologize for using quite a bit of our grief seeds today already."

Homura shakes her head and stores her weapon away into her shield.

"I'll take the next one. Do not apologize, grief seeds are meant to be used after all. I myself have used quite a few," she frowns at this. "Because of our combined efforts however, it shouldn't take too long to restock our supply. Survival is also important—if we need to use a grief seed, then we will use one."

Mami blinks, but pockets it. She has no doubts they will find another one. And if Homura needs it, she will definitely just give it back to her.

Madoka eyes dart to Homura nervously. "H-Homura-chan?"

"Hm?" she turns to regard the smaller girl carefully.

"Would... I mean... i-is there a chance that you'd run out a grief seeds?"

Mami's brow furrows as she thinks. "I've been a magical girl for a while now, and the witch population really hasn't dropped at all since I first started. It's... peculiar though, now that I think about it. Just how many magical girls have contracted...?"

Madoka winces at the thought of all those poor girls who were tricked by Kyuubey...

Homura shakes her head. "The thing we need to remember about witches is that they, like us, no longer follow the same physical restraints that surround the world."

"What do you mean, Homura-chan?" the corner of Madoka's mouth dips as she frowns in slight confusion.

Homura's ears twitch, and her flickering speckled tail stands out against the waning darkness.

"Many of the witches we fight come from other parts of the world, maybe from different time periods. Their barriers allow them to move and to hide; if they wanted to, they could most likely survive for centuries."

"Centuries..." Mami murmurs and shakes her head. "Still, the sheer numbers that are still in existence..."

Homura nods. "It does sound suspicious actually, considering how many we can kill in a week... Maybe..." something is tugging at her mind. She files it away for later. "Regardless, let us continue with our patrol. Since I won't be able to join you tomorrow, Tomoe Mami, I would like to utilize this time wisely."

Mami nods. "Of course, Akemi-chan."

Homura glances at Madoka, who gives her a determined nod.

"Let's go," she tells them, leading the way down the darkened pathways.

To the faint swirl of darkness that whispers light regrets into their ears.

\

It's past curfew when she steps into the apartment complex.

She hadn't meant to stay out so late—but witches wait for no one. And she finds spending time with Kyouko is a great distraction from the real world.

Her keys are already in her hands when she reaches her front door.

She just wants to shower, and go to sleep; today has definitely been a long day.

Expecting darkened rooms and closed bedroom doors when she steps inside, she's surprised to find the kitchen light is on.

Which is rare, since her parents are the type of people who believe in 'early to bed, early to rise.'

Thinking it is most likely a case of absentmindedness, which sometimes happened, Sayaka heads to the kitchen, intent on turning off the light.

And is surprised when both her parents are sitting at the kitchen table.

"Uhm, I'm back," Sayaka tells them out of reflex.

Both their faces are drawn, and her mother in particular has her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Welcome home, Sayaka. Please take a seat," her mother gestures to the chair across.

"Alright..." She walks over, before sliding into the chair, bag lowered to the floor. "Uhm, what's up?"

Her mother sighs. "Sayaka. Your father and I... we're worried about you. Did something happen at school? Did you... Did you somehow involve yourself with something? Is Madoka-chan okay? Hitomi-chan?"

"W-What?" Sayaka blinks at them. "They're fine. What do they have to do with anything?"

"You've been withdrawn lately. Coming home past curfew. Missing dinner. You... weren't home all weekend and you ignored your father and my calls."

She rubs at her neck nervously. "Y-Yeah. Uhm. Sorry about that..."

"Sayaka...Did something happen between you and Kyousuke-kun?"

Just hearing his name makes her flinch. "Uhm..."

/

Homura absently scratches Amy's chin as she frowns down at the paper in front of her. She's occupying the bed with her notebook in her lap, while Madoka sits at her desk, deep in thought, struggling with their assigned homework. Homura isn't working on homework, however. What she's doing is trying to make heads and tails of the strange request that Sayaka had made.

With Walpurgisnacht's arrival slowly creeping closer, she knows she should be doing more important things, like increasing her still alarmingly small arsenal. By now, she should have at least two warehouses full of missiles, rocket launchers and many, many other weapons. Instead, she's here, sitting in the safety of Madoka's room, trying to incorporate and make up some kind of magical girl baseball of all things.

Amy's soft purrs interrupt her thoughts. She glances down at her with a brief smile, before staring back at her blank notes.

Really, the only reason she's even humoring this request is that she's banking on Sayaka's participation to fight Walpurgisnacht; if the other girl survives these two weeks and actually trains diligently, her added help should at least be equivalent to ten or even more missiles.

Or maybe she's being too generous...

Nonetheless, if this timeline really will become *the one*, she needs to at least do everything in her power to make sure that everyone important to Madoka survives.

And if she has to figure out some type of baseball thing, then some type of baseball thing she will figure out.

"Arghhhh!" Madoka suddenly throws her hands in the air in frustration.

Homura turns and watches as she pushes the chair away from her desk.

Madoka looks to Homura as she stands. "I'm going to get something to drink. Do you want anything, Homura-chan?"

Homura shakes her head. "No, I'm fine, Madoka. I can help you when you come back?" she offers instead.

Madoka gives her a sheepish smile. "I feel bad asking you for help all the time... maybe a small break will help me concentrate better. But..." she sighs, "if I still can't get it..."

"I don't mind," Homura reassures her.

Madoka gives her a smile.

"I'll be back. Don't miss me too much," she jokes lightly, before she shuts the door behind her.

Homura gently runs her hand against Amy's face and closes her eyes.

"I miss you every day, Madoka..." she whispers into the quiet room.

/

As Madoka slowly makes her way to the kitchen, her mind is still occupied by her chemistry homework. It isn't until she's walking past the dining room that she finally notices the figure sitting in plain view at the table.

"Mama! I didn't see you there," she tells her, hand to her chest from the surprise.

Junko gives her slightly air headed daughter a smile.

"Madoka—have you finally come out of your room to keep your Mama company?" she asks, hands moving to swirl the amber liquid in her cup.

A sign of another tough day at work.

"Ahh." Madoka pauses. It's a battle between spending time with her mother, or spending time working on homework. "Let me get something to drink."

Junko nods in approval. Her eyes follow Madoka as she pours herself a cup of juice, before sliding into the seat across from her at the table.

"How have things been, Madoka?" Junko asks.

"Mm," Madoka thinks to Sayaka and witches and Homura and Kyouko and Mami. "It's okay," she decides after a moment. "Could be better though..."

"Yeah?" Junko hums as she takes a sip of her alcohol. "Does it have anything to do with a certain dark-haired girl?"

Madoka tries to fight down the blush that appears on her cheeks due to her mother's almost knowing look.

She shakes her head.

"N-No," she denies. Junko merely smiles as she takes another sip. "Uhm, I decided that I'm going to try harder during gym," she lies instead.

"Oh?" Junko raises an eyebrow at her. "Getting a head start for the sports festival?"

"Sort of," Madoka tells her, fingers absently running a line across the condensation starting to gather on her cup of juice. "I've been eating a lot more sweets lately..."

Junko laughs. "Don't want you turning into your namesake now," she teases. "It's good though—to want to improve yourself, even if you may think it's for the wrong reasons."

Madoka suddenly feels not so bad for joining them on their patrols; her reasons are definitely not wrong in wanting to help.

"Mama—" Madoka's question is cut off when she hears a noise behind her.

They both turn to find Homura standing in the hallway.

"...I was just seeing why you were taking so long, Madoka," she murmurs. The house is quiet enough that they hear her. "I'll leave you two alone."

Junko calls her over. "Come here, Homura. Grab a drink and join us."

Lavender eyes stare for a moment. It's only because earnest pink looks at her that she finally shuffles over.

They wait as she pours herself a cup of milk, before taking a seat next to Madoka.

Junko throws Madoka a look. She nods in understanding.

"How are things, Homura?" Junko asks.

Homura jumps at being addressed.

She keeps her eyes on her cup. "They're fine," she murmurs.

"Are you getting used to living here?"

Homura looks to Junko and nods. "...Yes."

"Good, good." Junko holds out her cup, eyes shining, whether from the alcohol or from something else. "You know, I hope that one day, you'll feel enough at ease here that you will be able to relax around us, and show the real 'Akemi Homura' that is buried behind all those walls."

Her admission startles Homura. She ducks her head and drinks her milk instead of answering.

Junko knows she's not going to get much out of the other girl, at least not tonight, and turns back to Madoka. "So what were you going to ask me, Madoka?"

"Ahh..." Madoka trails off, wondering if she should still ask since Homura is here.

"Hm? Is it something you can't say in front of Homura?" Junko teases her again.

She quickly shakes her head. "N-No, Mama! It's..."

"I can leave," Homura says, already standing up to do so.

"N-No, Homura-chan! It's fine," Madoka protests.

She reaches over and grabs the sleeve of Homura's sweater, pulling her back down to her seat.

"I-It..." there is no easier way to ask this and instead she dives right in, "Mama, how come...love is so hard?"

Junko watches her daughter carefully.

"Hm," Junko says as she leans forward slightly, her chin resting on her hand. "Did you fall in love with someone you're not supposed to, Madoka?" her eyes flicker over to the girl who's now gulping down her cup of milk.

"W-What?" Madoka waves her hands in front of her face. "N-No, Mama! I-It's not like that at all!"

Homura licks her lips as she finishes the last drop, obviously not paying attention. She blinks when she notices both of their gazes on her.

Madoka quickly tries to clear the misunderstanding. "I-It's just, I have a friend who recently confessed to the boy she likes, but he turned her down..." she explains. "And I want to help her, but I don't know how..."

Homura glances over to refrigerator, wondering if it's too rude to grab more milk.

Junko sighs, though there's a smile on her lips. "The hardest thing about love, Madoka, is that you can't choose who you fall in love with, or who falls in love with you. But," she smiles lightly, "that kind of thing is why falling in love is kind of fun too."

"Eh?" Madoka is obviously confused.

Her mother leans back, and adopts an almost nostalgic expression.

"Think about it, Madoka. If everything was so easy to obtain, what kind of people would we become? Life, and love is no different. It's the effort that we have to give; the act of trying our best to get something, trying our best to get someone to notice you, that has us becoming the best we can be. Life, love, gained with little to no effort will become stale. It's those bumps and hurdles you have to overcome, those experiences that help build things into something more."

There's a clink as the ice shifts in Junko's cup. She reaches down to circle the rim of her drink absently.

"Now," Junko continues, "if you're talking about who I think you are talking about... she should be fine. Young love tends to hurt the most because when you're at that age, it's one of the strongest feelings that you can experience. It's fine though; rejection is also something everyone must face in their lives. The younger you are when that happens, the better, because when you're young, it's easier to bounce back from those things. Soon, she'll be falling in love again with someone else. When you're an adult though and that happens," Junko shakes her head, "it's tough. And that," she holds up her cup, "is one of the reasons why we have alcohol. When life, or love gets too hard, sometimes it takes a good, strong, bitter drink, to help wash everything down."

Madoka smiles lightly. "Is that why you're drinking, Mama? Did you have a fight with Papa?" she teases.

Junko grins. "You know if that ever happens it'll be him in this spot."

They both laugh softly.

Madoka stares at her mom, eyes full of obvious admiration. "I can't wait until I'm old enough to drink with you, Mama."

Homura unconsciously grips her now empty cup and bows her head.

"You have plenty of time to grow up, Madoka," Junko tells her with a smile. "But, I'm looking forward to the day you're finally old enough to share a glass with me." Junko glances at Homura. "You, as well, Homura."

The surprise is evident on Homura's face.

Madoka smiles at Homura.

"Yeah, Homura-chan," she agrees. "When we're old enough, we'll be here, sitting with Mama and clinking our glasses together as we complain about our lives."

There's a joking lilt to her voice, but Homura can only guiltily avert her eyes.

/

There's a rustle of blankets behind her and someone mumbling her name. She turns around, and watches as a hand reaches out as if searching for something.

"H-Ho...mura..-chan...? H-Homura-chan?!"

Madoka sits up in fear just as Homura clicks on the small desk lamp.

"Madoka? What's wrong?" she hurries over to the smaller girl, who is blinking her eyes, dazed from the sudden flood of light.

It takes her a moment, until she realizes that Homura had asked her a question. "H-Homura-chan...?"

"I'm here, Madoka," Homura assures her, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "What's wrong, Madoka? D-Did...did you have a nightmare...?"

Madoka shakes her head.

"N-No..." she denies, though the tears that have gathered in her eyes doesn't convince Homura at all. "I-I... didn't feel you next to me and I thought something had happened," she whispers. "L-Like—" she chokes, and closes her eyes as tears trickles down her cheek.

"I-I'm sorry, Madoka," Homura reaches out, gentle fingers brushing the tears away. "I was working on something..." she explains.

Slightly unfocused pink eyes stare at her. "...In the dark?"

Homura nods hesitantly. "There's enough moonlight that I can see," she murmurs, "and I didn't want your parents knowing that I was still awake..."

"What time is it?" Madoka asks with a frown.

Homura glances over at the digital clock: 3:46am.

"Uhm." One look at Madoka's face and she knows the other girl saw as well.

"...Were you going to sleep at all?"

"...Yes...?"

"...meow..." They both glance over to Amy who is peering at them with one eye from her cat bed.

"..." Homura shoots the cat a glare.

Amy simply ignores her and snuggles deeper into her bed.

"We should go to sleep, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her after a moment. "We have school tomorrow. Or, I guess today," she says dryly.

Homura wants to refuse—she has already started finalizing her plans—but Madoka's disapproving look has her swallowing nervously.

"A-Alright, Madoka. I'll go turn off the light..."

Once natural moonlight settles into the room, Homura climbs into bed, taking up her usual spot besides Madoka. She stiffens automatically when she feels arms around her waist.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan..." Madoka says softly as she presses close to the other girl.

"G-Goodnight, Madoka..."

/

Unable to sleep, Homura stares at the ceiling above, suddenly realizing a huge flaw in her plan.

Somehow, with making this timeline *the one*, Madoka is starting to become attached to her—maybe even dependently so.

If they don't win, Madoka is definitely going to make a wish. She has never been more sure of this than ever.

Suddenly, the room feels too small; Madoka's arms too tight.

She can feel the grains of sand trickling down: less than two weeks to go.

She shouldn't be sleeping.

Wide awake, she gently tries to detach Madoka's arms from her waist with shaky hands.

"...Homura-chan?"

Arms tighten around her, pulling her closer.

"What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing," she whispers, voice breathless, panic gripping her soul. "I-I need to use the bathroom."

Madoka doesn't reply, nor does she let her go.

"What's wrong? Your heartbeat..."

"M-Madoka..."

"What's wrong?"

"C-Can you let go, Madoka?" Homura gasps out, struggling to control her breathing.

Madoka sits up, alert as she recognizes the signs: Homura is starting to hyperventilate.

She quickly pulls the curtains open for more light, before moving to help Homura sit on the edge of the bed.

"Put your head down, between your knees, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, gently pushing her down. "Relax, okay? You need to slow your breathing."

Homura gasps, trying to follow her instructions.

"You're okay, Homura-chan," Madoka rubs her back, trying to soothe her. "Slow, deep breaths, okay?"

She coughs, still gasping for air.

"Slow, deep breaths. Follow me, okay? Inhale..." Hand on her back, she can feel Homura breathing in. "Good. Keep going. A deep breath, okay? Now, breathe out slowly."

She does as told, shakily breathing out.

"Good. You're doing great, Homura-chan. Deep breaths, okay?"

This continues on for minutes, until Homura is finally calm, and her breathing is under control.

"Are you okay, Homura-chan?"

She swipes at her eyes, nodding at Madoka's question. "I-I'm sorry, Madoka. I-I'm fine now."

Madoka stares at her for a moment, before she reaches out, and places her hands on the side of Homura's face.

"Madoka...?"

She brings their foreheads together. "Homura-chan... what am I going to do with you...?"

"M-Madoka?"

She smiles, and Homura can see there's tears in her eyes.

"Madoka...?"

"You... " She blinks and a tear trickles down her cheek. She sighs, shaking her head.

"W-What's wrong, Madoka?"

Madoka doesn't respond, moving her body higher to drop a soft kiss on Homura's forehead.

"Let's go to sleep, Homura-chan. Did you still need to use the bathroom?"

Homura stares at her, eyes wide, and nods quickly.

"Hurry up then. We can still get at least 3 hours of sleep... maybe..."

Homura hops off the bed and darts out the door.

Madoka sighs, placing her hands to her cheeks.

A sudden weight against her leg.

"Meow."

Madoka smiles, reaching down to pet Amy. "Bumps and hurdles, huh, Amy?"

"Meow."

When Homura returns, she hesitates by the bed.

Madoka pats the spot next to her. "Whatever you're thinking, Homura-chan, we will think about tomorrow, alright?"

"Madoka...?"

"There's," Madoka looks to the clock: 4:30am. She sighs. "Less than 3 hours until we have to wake up. You need to get *some* sleep. We'll talk about things tomorrow—or more like later today. I'll help you with whatever you need help with, so please," she pats the bed again. "Come here, Homura-chan."

"B-But..."

"*Sleep*."

"...A-Alright..."

Homura reluctantly pads over and climbs in. Madoka pulls the blankets around them and presses herself against Homura, arms encircling her waist.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan."

"...Goodnight Madoka."

She closes her eyes, gripping Madoka's arms, seeking reassurance.

She's still here.

She's still alive.

She still has tim**e.**

AN: Just a liiiiittle bit late with the update.

Thanks for all the encouraging words, for reading, reviewing :) Let's see if I can finish this.

Chapter 18: gamble

As Homura slips her notebook into her book bag, she glances at the still snoozing Amy that is buried inside a bundle of blankets.

And briefly thinks how nice it would be to sleep a little bit longer.

She stifles a yawn, eyes closing as tired tears gather at the edges. As she's wiping them away, her squinted eyes spot the calendar propped on Madoka's desk.

It reminds her that today is Tuesday.

"Amy..." She reaches over and pulls at the fabric, earning her a disgruntled meow.

Amy buries deeper into the blankets.

"Amy...wake up."

There's a soft grumble.

"Amy..." Homura moves the blankets away once more. She places her hand under Amy's chin and scratches lightly. "Amy..." she gently coaxes her until finally one eye slowly opens to glare at her. "You have an appointment with the vet today. Meet me at school when classes end, okay?"

"..."

"Unless you want me to come pick you up?"

"..."

"...I know you heard me, Amy."

"...meoowww."

"..."

"...meoow."

Homura crosses her arms across her chest and frowns at her. "They're for your own good."

"Meow."

When Madoka enters the room after knocking fives times without Homura responding, she's greeted with the sight of the other girl glaring down at Amy as the cat smugly licks her paw in almost feigned disinterest.

"Alright," Homura sighs. "I'll buy more, but it doesn't mean you get to eat all of it at once."

"Meow."

"No—I don't care if you like it, too many treats are bad for you, Amy."

"Meow."

"...What does that have to do with anything?"

"Meowwww."

"Wha—"

"Uhm, Homura-chan?" An amused voice interrupts their argument.

Homura blushes lightly as she turns around. "M-Madoka? What's wrong?"

Madoka smiles at her. "Your breakfast is getting cold..."

"Ah..." Homura nods. She looks at the time: she had spent almost 5 minutes arguing with Amy. "I-I'll be right there."

She throws Amy a look and grabs their bags.

Madoka smiles, reaching for her own bag and for Homura's hand.

"Don't forget," Homura reminds Amy, giving her another glare as she disappears through the doorway with Madoka.

"Meow."

Amy pats down her blankets and flops down, eyes closing as footsteps fade away.

\

Madoka sighs, hand swinging Homura's as they walk to school.

"I'll be fine, Madoka," Homura tells her.

"But..." Madoka turns. "I don't like the idea of you patrolling by yourself..."

Homura shakes her head. "It's... I'm used to fighting alone. It's... it's easier if I don't need to watch anyone else..."

Madoka's grip tightens. As a non magical girl, she knows she's still a burden to Homura and Mami. Despite her talent with the bow, she knows that Homura always sticks by her for her protection.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka sighs once more. "Alright... I don't like it, but... alright."

"Thank you, Madoka."

"But!" Madoka turns to Homura. "Only patrolling! Nothing else!"

"Ma—"

"You know what I mean, Homura-chan!"

Homura glances to the floor. "Y-Yes. O-Only patrolling..."

"And I will know if you lie to me."

Homura nods. "Y-Yes."

/

"Is Sayaka-san still feeling sick ...?" Hitomi asks, walking side by side with Madoka and a slightly trailing Homura.

The sight of their held hands still distracts her, and she finds it easier to concentrate ahead.

It doesn't mean her eyes don't wander, but—

Sayaka isn't here today and—

"Mm," Madoka shakes her head. "I'm not sure... She didn't mention it when she messaged me last night... but... it might be better if she stays home for a bit...?"

"Yes, that may be true," Hitomi agrees. "Sayaka-san hasn't been herself lately... Perhaps she has been sick for a while..."

Madoka nods nervously. "Yeah... That's true.."

"Maybe we should visit Sayaka-san after school," Hitomi suggests as she turns Madoka.

"Eh? But don't you have..." Madoka thinks briefly, "..cram school to go to Hitomi-chan?"

Hitomi frowns in response. "I do, but I can just show up a little late; I'm already ahead in all my assignments. And considering what happened yesterday..." her voice trails off as she recalls what had happened on the roof. "Madoka-san?"

"Yes, Hitomi-chan?"

"How...did you meet Tomoe-san?"

"Ah..."

Normally, Madoka would feel a cold sweat breaking out just about now, as she has always been a bad liar.

But lately, lying to her mother has gotten easier.

And Hitomi is definitely not as observant as her Mama.

"I ran into Mami-chan near the mall," she explains.

"Oh?" Hitomi tilts her head curiously.

Madoka nods in affirmation. "Remember, you had to leave early for your lessons, and I went with Sayaka-chan to uhm," she pauses, trying to remember something that felt so long ago, "...the music store."

Hitomi nods.

"Well..." Madoka averts her eyes, "I accidentally... kind of, wasn't looking where I was going... and kind of... ran into Mami-chan..."

Homura watches Hitomi, gauging her reaction: she slowly nods once more.

"I see..."

"And, well," Madoka looks up with a smile, "somehow or other, we ended up being invited over to Mami-chan's place. And pretty much that's what happened."

"I...see. Tomoe-san is a ..." Hitomi remembers the look that Mami had given her yesterday, "...kind senpai, isn't she?"

"Of course!"

Homura briefly glances at Hitomi, before turning away.

/

"Ah, I see your acquaintance isn't here today, Tomoe-san," Hitomi comments when they arrive on the roof.

Mami nods. "Yes, she has decided to not cause any more unwarranted trouble, especially since she hasn't officially transferred in yet."

"And how is that coming along?" Hitomi asks politely as they make their way over to their usual seating. "Will she be transferring in sometime this week?"

"Ahh," Mami shakes her head and places a hand to her chin, appearing slightly troubled. "There are some problems with her paperwork from her old school. There were... certain circumstances which had her taking a year off, and that needs to be taken care of before the transfer will be accepted."

"I see. I hope that won't be too problematic."

Mami gives her a small smile. "At most it'll merely delay her transfer until next week. Thank you for your concern though, Shizuki-san."

They both take a seat, and Madoka silently mimics their actions, eyes nervously darting between the two.

There's a really tense and awkward atmosphere surrounding them, and Madoka wonders if it's related to what had happened yesterday; she just knows that Hitomi found Sayaka, Mami had found them both, and had dismissed Hitomi in order to give Sayaka a grief seed...

She glances to the stairs, mentally urging Homura to hurry up with buying her milk.

"Any word from Sayaka-san, Madoka-san?" Hitomi asks as she opens her bentou, facing the smaller girl when she's done.

Madoka pulls out her phone to check. Nothing.

"Not yet, Hitomi-chan," Madoka tells her.

She places the phone next to her, and just as she's about to unwrap her own lunch, there's a familiar chime. She hurriedly balances her bentou on her lap, and reaches for her phone.

'I don't think I can face Hitomi right now Madoka, so can you tell her that I'm still feeling sick or something. Thanks.'

Madoka turns to Hitomi and can see the worry written on her face. She can't help but feel bad lying to her when she is obviously worried about Sayaka.

"Seems like she's not feeling well enough for visitors, Hitomi-chan," Madoka apologizes.

"Ahh...I see...I wonder if it's only my phone carrier that's causing problems... " Hitomi frowns lightly. She turns to Mami. "Tomoe-san?"

Mami politely covers her mouth with her hand, finishing her bite of rice, before replying. "Yes, Shizuki-san?"

"Yesterday on the roof, did Sayaka-san mention anything to you about me...?"

Mami shakes her head. "No, not at all, Shizuki-san. I merely helped calm her down and escorted her to the nurse's office. Did something happen before I arrived?"

Hitomi tightens her grip on her bentou, frown deepening. "It...Sayaka-san seemed... particularly upset, when she saw me. She...mentioned that everything was my fault," she admits.

She turns to Madoka.

"Did she say anything to you, Madoka-san?" Hitomi asks her.

She quickly shakes her head. "N-No, not at all, Hitomi-chan..."

"I see..." Hitomi sighs softly. "I..." her voice trails off, and she averts her eyes.

The three girls fall into silence, returning to their bentous. Madoka checks the stairs, brightening when she sees a familiar figure approaching.

When she's close enough, she offers her a smile. "Homura-chan, welcome back."

Homura nods, arms filled with her usual stash of milk. She hands Madoka a box of strawberry milk.

"Thanks, Homura-chan."

To her surprise, Homura continues moving until she's in front of Hitomi.

"Shizuki Hitomi..."

The distracted girl starts slightly at the unfamiliar greeting.

She looks up. "Y-Yes, Akemi-san?"

"Would you like one?" Homura asks as she holds out a plain milk drink; it's the first time she has really gone out of her way to talk to Hitomi.

"A-Ah..." She's too shocked to form a proper response.

Homura merely gestures to the milk again, and she finally accepts it.

"T-Thank you, Akemi-san..."

Watching closely, Mami is hit with a sudden wave of jealousy. To her surprise, Homura approaches her next, and holds out another box.

Milk tea.

It makes Mami smile, and she accepts it graciously. "Thank you, Akemi-chan."

Homura finally takes her seat next to Madoka. As always, she carefully stacks her milk boxes on the bench.

Madoka leans over and places her head against Homura's shoulder, smiling to herself.

Homura blinks. "Madoka?"

"Ehehe, it's nothing, Homura-chan." She turns back to her lunch, still smiling.

Homura looks at her, but decides to accept Madoka's words.

She reaches for her milk: strawberry, as usual, is first.

\

As they pass through the school entrance, Homura feels a sudden weight on her shoulder. Amy is there, bringing her face to Homura's cheek, headbutting her in greeting.

"Amy," she replies.

Madoka smiles as she reaches over to scratch the black cat.

"Amy, you really came! I thought for sure you would make Homura-chan search for you or something," she teases as Amy purrs softly.

"We have a deal," Homura says, looking at Amy for confirmation.

"Meow," the cat replies.

Homura raises an eyebrow. "..."

"Meowww."

Homura's eye twitches slightly. "..."

Sensing that Homura is about to argue with Amy, regardless that they're standing on school grounds, and in view of all the students going home, Madoka steps in. She lifts Amy from Homura's shoulder and cradles her in her arms.

"Shouldn't we be leaving for the vet now, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks as she keeps Amy close to her chest.

"...yes..." Homura sighs, and flicks her hair behind her in exasperation.

"Ah, I will take my leave here as well, Madoka-san, Akemi-san," Hitomi tells them with a small bow.

There's obvious amusement in her eyes that Homura doesn't notice as she glares down at Amy. Hitomi and Madoka share a look, and then the taller girl is waving and walking away.

"Mami-san is meeting us at the training grounds after, right, Homura-chan?"

Homura bites down the urge to stick out her tongue at Amy and merely nods. She straightens to brush imaginary dust from her jacket.

"Yes, Tomoe Mami has classroom duties today and will head over there once she is finished." She pauses. "Did Miki Sayaka mention if she will be available? I was hoping to run by this ridiculous 'magical baseball' idea with her..."

"Ahh, yeah," Madoka nods as she pets Amy absently. "She said she'll be there—and Kyouko-chan too. I hope Sayaka-chan is doing better today..."

Homura adjusts the book bag in her hands as she decides her words carefully.

She can't bring herself to lie to Madoka however, and merely nods. "Let's go, Madoka."

"O-Okay, Homura-chan," she says, moving to match pace with the other girl. She looks down to Amy who blinks back at her. Madoka can't help but smile and hold her closer. "She'll be okay, right, Amy...?"

"Meow."

Homura glances at Amy briefly, before averting her eyes.

/

"Oh hey, there they are," Sayaka points out as Homura and Madoka step into the abandoned lot.

Kyouko yawns and stretches her arms behind her. "Finally."

"Sayaka-chan!" Madoka waves at her. "Kyouko-chan, Mami-chan! Sorry we're late—we had to drop by the pet store."

"It's alright Madoka-chan, Akemi-chan," Mami gives them a smile. "We haven't been waiting that long."

"You could have started practicing without us," Homura gives Sayaka a pointed look. "Stretches... something."

Sayaka rolls her eyes, before finally noticing the cat resting on Madoka's shoulders.

"Ooh, so is this Amy? Kinda reminds me of the transfer student."

"Ahh, that's right you still haven't met Amy yet huh, Sayaka-chan." Madoka turns her head and points to Sayaka. "Amy, this is Sayaka-chan." She points to Kyouko. "And that's Kyouko-chan."

"Nice to meet you, Amy," Sayaka reaches out a hand to Amy in greeting.

Amy hisses, swiping out her claws. Everyone stares at the new scratches now present on Sayaka's hand.

Madoka's eyes widen. "Amy!"

Homura frowns. "Amy—"

"Meow."

Homura blinks, and turns to regard Sayaka critically, eyes narrowed.

She suddenly rushes forward, hand grabbing the front of Sayaka's shirt. "Miki Sayaka—show me your soul gem."

"What the hell, Kitty Cat?" Kyouko demands. "Her magic feels fine to me."

"Akemi-chan—what's wrong?"

"Your soul gem." Homura tightens her fist as Sayaka looks at her.

Madoka reaches out to stop her. "Homura-ch—"

Homura suddenly flinches, ears and tail appearing.

"H-Homura-chan!" She turns wide eyes towards Sayaka.

"Unfortunately for you," Homura coughs lightly into her free hand, "distancing yourself from your soul gem also makes your magic not as affective. That won't be enough to stop me. I repeat—show me your gem."

Catching on, Kyouko immediately grabs Sayaka from Homura's grasp. She easily lifts her off her feet. "Oy! Your soul gem! NOW!"

"Sayaka, please," Mami begs.

Madoka reaches for Homura, eyes darting between the two in worry.

Sayaka closes her eyes and holds out her trembling left hand. Mami grabs it, steadying it with her own.

They watch as her ring transforms.

"Sayaka-chan!" Madoka feels her heart drop. "W-Why...?" She grips Homura's arm.

"What the hell!" Kyouko growls at the swirling darkness that should've been bright blue. She shakes Sayaka roughly. "YOU TOLD ME YOU WOULD BE FINE! SMALL THINGS, YOU DAMN NOVICE!"

Homura is silent, watching as Mami places a grief seed next to Sayaka's soul gem. It takes a moment, before it finally starts drawing the darkness away.

Kyouko drops her as soon as it finishes. She falls to the floor, legs crumbling beneath her as her eyes blink slowly, as if waking from a dream.

"Sayaka," Mami kneels down to help her sit up. She hands her back her soul gem. "What happened?"

Sayaka shakes her head. "I..." she swallows hard.

"When did he visit you?" Homura interrupts, voice sounding muffled.

They all glance at her. There's a handkerchief held to her mouth.

"Homura-chan...?"

She coughs into the cloth.

Madoka watches as she tries to conspicuously pull away—but she's close enough that she sees what Homura was trying to hide.

Madoka's eyes widen and turns to Sayaka. "What did you do?!"

Sayaka bows her head.

"Madoka," Homura places a hand on her arm. "Please, calm down. I'll be fine. I just—need to sit for a moment," she murmurs, slightly wavering on her feet.

Madoka grabs her, and helps lower her to the ground.

"W-What's wrong?" she asks worriedly.

Homura shakes her head.

She quickly summons her soul gem, and holds it close to her chest. It glows purple as she concentrates.

It takes a moment, until her breaths suddenly seem stronger, and she sighs in relief.

Homura turns to Sayaka. "Very interesting skill, Miki Sayaka. I don't believe I've ever seen your magic used that way. How did you figure that out?"

Madoka places her hands on Homura's cheeks, forcing her to face her.

"You did not just write that off as nothing, Homura-chan. Explain what happened. *Now*."

Homura's ears flatten, and she swallows nervously.

"...I negated the healing magic she uses on her heart," Sayaka answers for her.

Everyone turns, varying expressions of shock on their faces.

Except Madoka—who looks absolutely livid.

"You did *what*!?"

Sayaka flinches.

Homura keeps her hands on Madoka's arm, stopping her from standing.

"Where did you learn that?" Homura asks again.

Sayaka looks away.

Homura sighs, this time deliberately leaning against Madoka to keep her from doing something she will regret; she knows she's angry: the tense jawline, the narrowed eyes.

"...Amy smelled him on you," Homura tells her instead.

"Who..." Kyouko grits her teeth in understanding. "That damn Kyuubey!"

Sayaka covers her eyes with her hand. "I—"

"He taught you how to do that?" Homura asks.

Sayaka grips her head with her hand. "I... asked him. I asked him to teach me." She laughs to herself. "Yesterday, at school—I felt something when you grabbed my arm. I could feel your own magic surrounding your heart—healing it, keeping you alive." She laughs even louder. "He explained how I could possibly use it—but I actually put it to use."

She suddenly glances down to her soul gem.

Homura immediately notices. "Tomoe Mami! Stop her!"

Mami is the closest and without another thought, tackles Sayaka, hands gripping her wrists roughly. Sayaka's soul gem rolls harmlessly away just as Mami summons her own ribbons and wraps them around her.

"What are you doing, you freaking idiot?!" Kyouko yells, eyes wide as she realizes what Sayaka was about to do.

"Sayaka, please, calm down," Mami tells her as she sits up. Her lips are pursed and eyes hard.

Sayaka laughs again. "Some kind of magical girl I turned out to be! I can't even confess to Kyousuke," Madoka's eyes widen at this admittance, "who thinks that I hate him now! And—my own parents, think I'm turning into some kind of delinquent! I—"

A painful gasp, and there's a foot suddenly on her stomach.

"Oy, Mami. Release her," Kyouko tells the blonde as she places more pressure down.

Mami stares, but Kyouko keeps her eyes on Sayaka.

"Since you're gonna freaking die anyways, I've got a bone to pick with you. So you're gonna fight me, and I'm gonna kill you myself."

Kyouko transforms and points her spear at Sayaka.

"Mami."

"Kyouko, please, it doesn't have to be like this," Mami begs, trying to reason with her.

Crimson eyes swivel to her—and whatever Mami sees in them—

She sighs, and the ribbons surrounding Sayaka disappear. Kyouko kneels, hands grabbing Sayaka by her shirt front, and lifts her up once more.

"Transform," she orders, voice ice cold.

"K-Kyouko-chan," Madoka holds out a hand. "S-Stop, please."

Kyouko ignores her, pulling Sayaka closer. "Transform. *Now*."

"H-Homura-chan," Madoka turns to the other girl. "Stop—"

Her plea dies on her lips when she sees Homura; Amy is nudging her, trying to keep Homura awake. Madoka reaches over to hold her close; she's in no condition to step in.

Madoka looks at Mami, but the blonde meets her eyes and shakes her head.

"W-Wait..."

Kyouko throws Sayaka roughly onto the ground. "Transform! I said to transform, you piece of trash!"

Sayaka remains in her spot. "Just kill me already... I can't... I can't handle this..."

"Nuh uh," Kyouko lifts her once more only to shove her forward.

Unsteady on her feet, Sayaka falls, kicking up dust as she tumbles to the floor.

Kyouko is suddenly there, kneeling in front of her. She grabs a fist full of blue hair and tugs Sayaka's head up.

"Transform."

"Why—"

Madoka winces, turning away when she sees Kyouko slam Sayaka's face to the ground.

"Transform!"

Madoka holds Homura tighter. "H-Homura-chan," she whispers.

Soft ears press against her cheek; Amy nudges her leg.

Another sound.

"*Transform*!"

Madoka scrunches her eyes close, hands trembling as she waits for the sound to repeat.

To her relief, it doesn't.

She opens her eyes just as Sayaka stands, blood on her face yet no wounds present.

A flash of blue.

"Good," Kyouko tells her. "Take out your weapon."

Sayaka stares at her blankly. Her cutlass is suddenly in her hands.

Kyouko smirks, but there's no humor on her face.

"Alright. This is the last thing you're gonna do, so you better make this count," Kyouko tells her, readying her weapon.

Sayaka remains standing, weapon still loose in her hands, arms still resting at her side.

"...What the hell did I tell you, novice?" Kyouko grits out. "I spent hours teaching you about proper grip and stance!" She quickly brings her spear down and knocks the sword from Sayaka's hands. "Hold it properly!"

Sayaka grits her teeth. "Just kill me already, I'm—"

A spear almost slashing her cheek—she dodges out of reflex.

"Oh?" Kyouko calls out to her. "I thought you wanted me to kill you?"

Madoka quickly closes her eyes and buries her face in Homura's shoulder.

The spear is thrust forward, and this time Sayaka steps back.

"Hold still, so I can shish kebab you!"

Sayaka shakes her head. "What—"

The wind whistles and she dodges once more, gaining a grazed cut that quickly heals.

Kyouko eyes her critically. She rushes forward, jabbing the spear where Sayaka's face should be.

Except this time, it's parried and there's a clang as steel hits steel.

"Well, well, well. Guess you still have some fight left in you after all." Kyouko sneers.

Sayaka shakes her head again. "This is your fault—Your stupid drills keep making me want to move away!"

"Good." A fanged grin. "This'll make it much more fun!"

Kyouko swings her spear down, chains disconnecting as it threatens to entangle Sayaka.

The spear is knocked away by Sayaka's sword, who slices up in retaliation.

Two side steps and Kyouko deliberately twirls the spear above her.

"22," she says suddenly.

Sayaka blinks in confusion. "What?"

The spear slams down.

Another parry, grit teeth as Sayaka's hand throbs from the pain. Another quick heal.

The spear doubles back. She dodges, ducking and rolling forward at the same time.

Kyouko whirls around, spear following her movements and another stab.

Sayaka tumbles to the ground, before she scrambles to her feet.

"That's how many sticks of pocky you ate," Kyouko tells her.

It's enough of a distraction—because who counts their food?

And a foot to her stomach is her price.

She's kicked back, sent to the floor as she coughs in pain.

"That kind of stuff isn't cheap, you know?" she hears Kyouko say. "Not to mention all those lessons I gave you... how many hours I wasted teaching you how to not be so worthless."

Sayaka sits up just as another foot connects with her ribs. She curls in, hugging her legs close as her body starts healing.

"If I knew you were going to be trash, I should've thrown you away the first chance I had."

A boot on her back.

"So stand up, and fight me. You *owe* me, you piece of trash. Each pocky stick, worth 100yen. Each minute of your lesson, 500yen."

Hands pulling at the roots of her hair, tugging her upward.

"Your useless, pathetic life won't pay for everything—but it's all you have to offer. So *stand up*."

Tears gather in her eyes.

She is useless—

"Maybe, afterwards I'll go and visit that little Pretty Boy of yours."

Those words stop all other thoughts.

"W-What?" she croaks.

Kyouko grins at her, fang out, eyes cold. "The way you described him, sounds like a little rich kid. Violin, right?"

"What are you—"

"Not to mention his girlfriend—"

Sayaka grits her teeth.

"Seaweed girl... the air around her just screams 'money,' you know?"

"S-Stop it... w-what are you..."

"Shut up, trash. You're already dead. You got no say in this."

Kyouko lets go and Sayaka drops to the floor.

"Guess that's it then," Kyouko says as she shakes her head. "Couldn't even fight back. Tch."

Fingers press into the dirt as Sayaka pushes herself up. A knee into the ground and she unsteadily raises her head.

"D-Don't touch them..."

Kyouko stares at her, spear raised above her.

"Nah, you're already dead."

The spear slams down, meeting metal as Sayaka blocks it with her sword.

Blue eyes burn with anger. "You...!"

A line of weapons drawn around her.

Kyouko grins, jumping back.

"I see. So you do have some fight left in you."

No response as Sayaka rushes forward, a sword in each hand.

/

Madoka holds Homura close, not wanting to watch what's happening.

Hearing the words are bad enough.

"They will be fine, Madoka-chan," Mami murmurs.

The sounds of metal clashing has Madoka whimpering.

She opens her eyes and turns to Mami.

"M-Mami-chan... s-shouldn't we stop them...?"

Mami is watching the fight closely, though she gives Madoka a brief glance in reassurance.

"...You know, Kyouko and I...we fought like this, once."

Homura shifts in Madoka's arms, turning a sleepy eye towards the blonde, curious.

Mami closes her eyes, letting the music of swordplay carry on in front of them.

"We... had a disagreement. About... many things," Mami continues softly. "Sometimes, some things can't be spoken with words."

Golden eyes open to watch as Sayaka leaps high into the air, swords pushing against Kyouko's latticed barrier.

"It may sound like something from the movies, but it's true that sometimes, fights are the only words you need. If you believe in something hard enough, then you must be willing to defend, and place your life on the line for it."

They can hear the regret in her voice.

Sayaka's yell has everyone turning their attention back to the fight.

A line of swords circling above Kyouko, who easily twists her body to avoid being impaled.

"This is... Kyouko's belief in Sayaka. She believes she's strong enough to survive this."

Mami gives Madoka a smile.

"Look, Sayaka has improved," she comments as they watch another line of red appear on Kyouko's arm. "She's become stronger."

Madoka feels tears prickling; she doesn't understand.

Homura nuzzles her face into Madoka's neck, eyes closing once more.

She hasn't felt this weak in a while; a testament to how deadly Sayaka's new skill can be.

\\

She's caught up in their fight—thoughts on nothing but winning.

She wants to win.

She wants to wipe that smirk off Kyouko's face.

She wants to show her—that she's not trash.

That she's not useless.

That she can fight.

She—realizes that she wants to live.

But—they're too far in now. In too deep.

Kyouko's attacks are getting stronger. No holding back.

Their lives as their wager. This fight, the bet.

Mimicking Mami's skill, she summons her swords around her. They're a part of her, she, of them. She concentrates, lifting them up.

Kyouko notices, lips twisting into a smirk.

A line of swords shoot forward, a dance of swords in the air.

Sayaka watches with narrowed eyes—and spots it, an opening.

Two swords in quick succession dive towards an exposed arm.

Two new lines of dripping blood.

She doesn't allow Kyouko to recover, instead this time she rushes forward.

Three more swords summoned around her, thrown as a distraction.

Kyouko easily parries them away with three small clanks.

Sayaka adds more magic into her legs, shooting forward with a dash of speed.

Kyouko's eyes widen briefly, stepping back in surprise.

But Sayaka is ready for her, arm out, hand reaching.

She grabs Kyouko's arm—the one lined with cuts.

She can feel it—Kyouko's magic as it works to stem the bleeding and stop the pain.

It's exactly what she's looking for.

She remembers that feeling, the twisting in her soul—

"Wha—"

Kyouko's words, cut off into a strangled cry of pain.

As a shower of blood splashes across their faces.

/

Homura wakes with panicked heartbeats to loud screams.

She quickly pushes herself away from Madoka, head turning to the fight.

Red.

Red flooding the ground as Sayaka kneels in front of a downed Kyouko.

Homura blinks when there's a flash of yellow, and turns to see that Mami has transformed.

A musket in her hand.

A certain look on her face.

Homura recognizes it—how can she not? It's one of her nightmares that used to haunt her every night.

Her shield is quickly summoned, and time clicks to a stop just as the bullet is fired.

She staggers to her feet, expertly chopping her hand into Mami's neck—knowing that she doesn't reinforce her barrier like Kyouko does; she has no need, she is not a melee fighter.

And with unsteady footsteps, heart still throbbing painfully, she heads over to save Sayaka's life.

/

Madoka's scream cuts off as she glances over to see Mami keel over onto the ground.

And she notices that Homura is now besides Sayaka, who has been moved.

"Heal her, Miki Sayaka," Homura tells her in between labored breaths. "Heal her before Tomoe Mami wakes and finishes what she was about to do."

Sayaka can only stare, eyes wide, at her hands that are covered in red.

"Heal her," Homura grabs her, grip weak as she lightly shakes her; it's more like a gentle nudge. "She is bleeding out; your magic is blocking her own."

Her hands tremble.

Blood—it's all she can see. Blood.

"Miki, Sayaka—" Homura coughs lightly.

It's—

There's strong hands on her, turning her around.

She sees—red—

And sudden pain on her cheek.

Madoka.

"Sayaka-chan! Listen to Homura-chan! You need to heal Kyouko-chan! She's—she's going to *die*."

It snaps her from her daze and she looks down, finally able to see Kyouko whose face is scrunched up in pain.

"Freaking cheateeer," Kyouko grumbles, hands gripping her shoulder to try and stop the bleeding. "If... I knew... you were gonna... do that. I would've—chopped your... arm... off. See... how you like...Ugh... do you know... how hard it is to use chopsticks... with your left hand...? Freaking... cup ramen...Y-Yakisoba..."

"Heal her," Homura tells her again.

Sayaka holds out her shaking hands above Kyouko's wound—to the emptiness that should be her arm.

She hesitates. "I-I can't. W-What if I—"

"It doesn't matter if you can't," Homura hisses at her, annoyance flooding her mind from her fatigue. "Either you heal her, or she dies. If she dies, Tomoe Mami kills you. This stupid endless cycle always starts with *you*, Miki Sayaka! Heal her, *now*!"

Her shout is punctuated by more coughs, prompting Madoka to abandon Sayaka's side and rush over to Homura.

"Sayaka-chan... please," Madoka whispers to her, holding Homura close. "This—isn't the Sayaka-chan I know... Sayaka-chan is brave, protecting those who can't protect themselves. Prone to loneliness and false bravado—but she'd never abandon her friends. She'd... never willingly let someone die if she could somehow prevent it..."

Sayaka sucks in a deep breath, eyes finally clear as Kyouko stares at her.

"You... owe me... dinner," Kyouko chokes out.

It makes her want to cry—how can she joke at a time like this?

"Yeah," Sayaka tells her as tears trail down her cheeks. "Dinner."

Her hands glow blue as a musical barrier surrounds Kyouko.

Musical notes dancing, and a comforting warmth as the pain slowly fades away.

"I'm sorry," she says softly, bowing her head. "I'm sorry."

\\

A grief seed used for the both of them, before Sayaka works on healing Homura's heart.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs down to her. If she had concentrated harder—she would have most likely damaged Homura's heart the same way.

That thought makes her blood run cold.

Homura bites back a groan, Madoka automatically stroking her ears to comfort her.

"Shh, Homura-chan, it's okay. You'll be okay," she murmurs softly as Homura tries to twist away from Sayaka's hands.

"S-Stop," she grits out, quickly slapping Sayaka's hands away. "Y-You're making it worse."

Sayaka frowns. "I-I was healing it."

Homura curls her legs in, turning to bury her head in Madoka's lap. "Nngh... Your magic..."

She sits up quickly to cough up a mouthful of blood.

"Homura-chan!?"

She shakes her head. "G-Give me, a minute," she tells her, summoning her soul gem in her hand. "I-I just... need... to..."

They watch as she concentrates on her magic.

Amy paces around her, restless, occasionally headbutting her in the leg for reassurance.

Off to the side, Kyouko is moving her newly healed arm, testing it, and stops when she notices Mami stirring awake.

Golden eyes open to a familiar face grinning down at her.

"Yo, Sleeping Beauty. Awake?"

"Kyouko…?" Her eyes widen and she sits up—or tries to, but she's bound in ropes. "W-What is this? What happened?"

"Hmm. Well, you were apparently going to off Sayaka, so Kitty Cat kinda chopped you into a deep sleep, Princess."

The joking tone to her voice has Mami stopping her struggles.

"…A-Are you alright, Kyouko…?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." She holds out her arm for Mami to see. "See? Good as new." She grins. "Nothing can stop me from cup ramen."

Mami closes her eyes, sighing in relief. "Good. I—"

"…Thanks. Uhm. For getting mad, I guess. On my behalf."

Mami opens her eyes, barely able to move her head up to see Kyouko glancing to the side, eyes suddenly looking shy.

"I…I'm sorry, Kyouko."

"W-What?" Kyouko turns back.

Mami is crying.

"If only I had been strong enough to help you back then. If I had won, maybe—you wouldn't have left. Some kind of senpai I was, huh?"

She can't wipe her tears away, and they flow freely down her face.

Kyouko sighs.

"I... No, it was... I... didn't want to drag you down with me," Kyouko tells her, watching as Madoka gathers Homura in her arms, pulling her close once more. "I... know you held back...I... took advantage of your kindness... I didn't want to be a burden to you. You... You're the only family I had left. I thought... that if I stayed by you, you'd end up getting hurt—or—" she grits her teeth, wiping at her eyes angrily.

Mami laughs softly. "We only wanted to help each other, but we did everything wrong..."

Kyouko remains quiet.

"...Kyouko, can you untie me?"

"Oh, whoops. Uh... actually Kitty Cat said to wait first. To make sure you're not going to turn on any of us..."

Mami sighs softly. She pauses, thoughts on Sayaka. "...Perhaps that would be best."

Kyouko glances over, noticing that Mami's cheeks are stained with tears. Her hand reaches into her pockets and fast food napkins are pulled out.

"They're clean," Kyouko murmurs as she moves to help wipe Mami's face.

"T-Thank you, Kyouko..."

"Yeah."

Kyouko turns her attention back to the other three, eyes looking, but thoughts elsewhere.

"Kyouko?"

"Yeah?"

"It's...kind of late, but... welcome back."

Kyouko turns away.

"...I'm back, Mami."

/

It takes a while—for the anger to subside.

For Homura to heal.

Finally, Mami is free, and Homura is resting against Madoka.

They gather together once more.

"You know," Kyouko comments, looking around, "we've almost come full circle."

Sayaka stares at her. "What?"

Kyouko points to Mami. "We've fought." She points to Homura. "We've fought." She finally points to Sayaka. "We fought." She points to Mami again. "And you and Mami were gonna fight. Now, Kitty Cat just has to fight against you two and everyone will have tried to kill each other."

A disapproving look from Mami and a frown from Madoka.

"Well," Kyouko looks at Madoka. "You can join us if you ever contract."

Homura turns her head to glare at Kyouko.

"What? I just wanted to make sure she didn't feel left out!"

Madoka gives Kyouko a smile while her hand pats Homura on the back. "Thanks, Kyouko-chan."

"Okay. So. What now...?" Sayaka asks as she looks around.

"...Madoka and I need to return home soon," Homura tells her, voice muffled as she speaks into Madoka's shoulder.

Sayaka nods. "Y-Yeah... I think I should go home soon as well," she catches Kyouko's look, "...don't worry, I remember I owe you dinner." She shakes her head. "My parents are going to be even more angry... I'm supposed to be sick..."

Homura mutters something under her breath, but Madoka is close enough that she hears her.

"Homura-chan," she scolds softly, tightening her arm around her waist.

"Meow," Amy replies.

"S-See, Madoka? Amy agrees," Homura tells her.

"Homura-chan..."

"Meow."

"S-Shhh Amy..."

"Meow..."

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" Sayaka holds out a hand as she places her other one to her forehead. "Are you telling me... transfer student can understand Amy?"

Everyone turns to her, but no one looks the least bit surprised.

"Seriously?" Sayaka turns to Kyouko. "You believe this?"

Kyouko quirks an eyebrow. "More like you don't? Look at her!"

Sayaka rubs her forehead. "Really? I'm the weird one here?"

"Meow..."

"A-Amy, shhhh," Homura reaches out and pats Amy's head. "It's true, but some things are left better unsaid..."

Sayaka glares at her. "What is she saying about me?" She points to Amy. "Don't you know it's rude to talk about someone when they're in front of you!"

"Meow."

Sayaka shakes her head. "Wait, what am I doing? I'm arguing with a cat!"

"What did she say, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks.

"N-Nothing," Homura stammers out nervously.

"Sounds kind of suspicious," Kyouko says as she stares at her. "Translate for us, Kitty Cat."

Homura buries her face into Madoka's neck. "N-No..."

"Meow."

Homura's tail flickers as she peers over at Amy.

"What she saying?" Kyouko asks, eying the cat; she always knew she was a dog person.

"U-Uhm..."

"I'm curious as well, Akemi-chan," Mami throws in, trying convince her.

"Meow."

"S-Shhh, Amy. T-That's—"

"Meow."

"M-Madoka, we s-should go."

Madoka runs her hands across Homura's ears. "...Amy's not saying anything good, is she...?"

Homura looks up at her. "A-Amy likes you, Madoka."

Madoka smiles in amusement.

"You wanna go, huh, kitty?" Kyouko glares down at Amy.

"Meo**w."**

AN: whew. Action scenes are not my forte. I've been editing this chapter too much, which is why it's kinda late. teehee. I'm reaching the end of my pre-written stuff... and this is where I usually falter with stories. What does I do!?

Thanks for reviewing/reading! I noticed some new readers commenting! :) as well as the usual suspects! Really, thanks for all the feedback!

Chapter 19: return

"We're home!" Madoka calls out, supporting a very sleepy Homura through the doorway.

The trip back had been a bit of a struggle due to Homura's stubbornness, and Madoka sighs in relief when they're finally here.

She helps Homura take off her shoes, leaving their bags nearby, before they head further in.

Takkun turns to her, hands clutching toy cars as he grins. "Maroka! Welcome back!"

"Welcome back, you two," Junko greets them, immediately standing when she notices Homura. "What's wrong?"

At her tone, Tomohisa looks over from the kitchen, spatula lowered in concern. "Is she alright?"

"Uhm, we were working on some drills for gym after school, and she pushed herself a bit too hard," Madoka lies easily.

"Poor thing," Junko places a hand on Homura's forehead. "She feels a bit warm. I'll help you carry her to your room."

Junko loops her arm around Homura's thin waist, surprised by how little she weighs.

Maybe she'll need to monitor her eating habits.

"We'll be back, Takkun," Junko tells him.

She exchanges a look with her husband, and he nods, eyes still worried as he watches them head into the hall.

"Okayy," Takkun replies, glancing over to Homura, but Amy distracts him when she hops into his lap. "Kittyyy~"

They easily make it to Madoka's room, lowering Homura onto the bed once they're there.

"Does she need help changing?" Junko asks, watching as Madoka rummages through the drawers for a clean set of pajamas.

"Mm..." Madoka glances to Homura, who shakes her head. "I think we should be okay, Mama."

"Alright." Junko places her hand atop Homura's head, prompting her to look up with sleepy eyes. "Feel better, alright, Homura?"

She nods, eyes closing briefly.

Junko grins, hands moving to muss up her hair. She turns to Madoka. "Call me if you need anything."

"Okay, Mama," Madoka replies, even though her eyes are watching Homura who's now struggling to fix her hair. "Let me help you, Homura-chan..."

Junko leaves the room, door clicking shut behind her.

/

A quick change, and Homura sleeps all through dinner, continuing to sleep hours after.

Madoka is hunched over her desk, struggling with her homework when she finally hears rustling. She turns to the bed.

From underneath the blankets, out pokes a very messy head of black hair.

"How are you feeling, Homura-chan?" she asks, chair already pushed back as she stands to walk over.

Homura lays there for a moment, eyes struggling to remain open.

Madoka takes a seat on the bed, hands brushing Homura's hair back, giving her a clear look at the face with various sleep lines pressed upon her cheek.

"Are you hungry?' Madoka asks her. "I can heat up dinner for you and bring it to the room."

Homura turns her head, burying her face back into the blankets.

Madoka smiles, running her fingers through Homura's long hair, straightening out a few tangled knots.

"What time is it...?" Homura asks, voice still thick with sleep.

"Hmm," Madoka looks at the clock, "10:32pm. You slept for almost 5 hours."

"Mm..."

They remain this way for a few minutes, until Homura eventually sits up.

"Are you feeling better?" Madoka asks once more.

Homura nods, rubbing at her eyes. "Yes, much."

"Dinner?"

Homura's grumbling stomach answers for her.

Madoka grins while Homura blushes.

"Did you want to eat here, or in the dining room? Mama and Papa are probably watching TV in the living room."

"...can I eat here?" Homura asks softly.

"You need to stop being so shy," Madoka tells her, hands stroking the top of her head, before she pulls away. "Alright, I'll go heat it up while you go wash up."

Homura nods. "Thank you, Madoka."

/

Now sitting on the bed, Madoka is smiling to herself as she continues to watch Homura eat her dinner. It's not that she means to stare, it's just that she has never noticed Homura's eating habits as she's usually busy eating, or talking, or doing something when Homura eats.

But, as Homura is occupying the desk as she eats, and Madoka is already stuck on her homework, she's absently petting Amy as she watches Homura.

Watches as she methodically cuts into her food with her fork, and how she deliberately avoids certain things on the plate.

"Mm... finish your vegetables, Homura-chan," she tells her.

Homura jumps, startled. She glances over to Madoka who gives her a knowing smile.

She averts her eyes, and quickly stuffs the remaining pieces of broccoli into her mouth. Madoka grins when she watches Homura reach for her milk, no doubt needing the drink to wash them down.

Madoka pushes off the bed, moving to stand. "Did you want anymore, Homura-chan?"

Homura shakes her head. "No, I am fine. Thank you."

"Milk?"

Her pause lasts long enough that Madoka decides for her.

"Alright, I'll go get some more for you. I'll be right back," Madoka tells her, gathering the used dishes and empty cup in her hands.

"T-Thank you, Madoka," Homura looks up at her.

If her hands weren't full, Madoka would be tempted to pinch her cheeks.

"Mmhmm," she merely replies, smiling.

Homura watches as she leaves. Once Madoka is out of sight, she leans back against the chair.

"Meow."

She turns to face Amy. "Hm?"

"Meow."

"Hmmm..."

"Meow."

When Madoka returns, holding a cup of milk in her hands, she's greeted with the sight of Homura sitting on the floor, with Amy in front of her on the bed.

And they're deep in conversation.

"Meow."

"I'm not sure if my teeth are sharp enough..."

"Meow..."

"I've never really tried...?"

"Meow."

"But..."

Madoka clears her throat and Homura jumps, not at all noticing her entrance.

She brightens when she sees the milk, but one glance at Madoka's face and she quickly sits up, legs tucked underneath and hands placed on her knees.

"M-Madoka?"

"What were you discussing with Amy, Homura-chan?"

Homura looks at Amy for help, but the cat pointedly ignores her. "N-Nothing."

Madoka sighs. "You're a horrible liar, Homura-chan. But," she smiles, "I guess it's because there's some people you can't lie to, hm?"

Madoka holds out the cup, Homura eying it with muted enthusiasm that doesn't fool her.

"Now, what were you talking to Amy about?"

Homura's eyes nervously dart around the room.

"I'm feeling kind of thirsty," Madoka says suddenly.

Homura looks up and watches as Madoka brings the cup close to her lips. Pink eyes glance over, as if asking for permission.

Homura stares. "Y-You can have it, Madoka."

Madoka pulls the glass away, suddenly feeling bad. "You..." she shakes her head, and offers the cup to Homura. "Here, Homura-chan."

"But, aren't you feeling thirsty...?"

Madoka sighs. "Homura-chan, please take it—you're making me feel even worse."

Homura happily receives it, but gives Madoka a worried look. "Y-You should rest if you're not feeling well, Madoka."

Madoka flops onto her bed, the slight bounce disturbing Amy who meows in protest.

"Ugh, I can't win against you, Homura-chan," she sighs out.

"Madoka...?"

"Drink your milk, Homura-chan."

"...O-Okay..."

The milk disappears a few seconds later, and with her eyes closed, Madoka hears the clatter as Homura places the empty glass onto the desk.

"Madoka...?"

"Hmmm?" she sleepily replies.

"Remember, what we discussed earlier this morning...?"

Her eyes open, and she turns her head so she can look at Homura, who's still sitting on the floor. "...You're going to patrol?"

Homura nods.

"Now?"

Another nod.

"After what happened today?"

A more hesitant nod.

"After you just slept for five hours because you were feeling too sick to stay up?"

Homura stares at her. "But I slept..."

"Is your heart even all healed up?"

"Y-Yes."

"Is it?" Madoka sits up. "Come here, Homura-chan."

"W-What?"

"Come here."

Homura blinks, and stands. She plods over to Madoka, stopping in front of her.
"Madoka?"

"Sit next to me."

She sits.

Wordlessly, Madoka places a hand on her chest.

Homura stiffens in embarrassment, but Madoka ignores her, concentrating on Homura's heartbeat.

"Take a deep breath, Homura-chan."

"M-Mado—"

"Homura-chan."

She inhales.

"A deep breath, Homura-chan."

She breathes out, and tries to suck in more air.

It's just as shallow.

Madoka glances at her, removing her hand.

Homura remains quiet. "...But I'm okay," she insists after a moment. "I-It's healing. My magic..."

Madoka sighs, and wraps her arms around Homura.

She pulls her down onto the bed. "Why do you always want to do things by yourself?"

Homura looks away. "It's... it's better this way..."

Hands on her face. "You're not alone anymore, Homura-chan. You have me, Mama, Papa, even Takkun. Mami-chan, Sayaka-chan, Kyouko-chan. We are all here for you. Can't you just rest? One day missed of patrol and a day of rest is better for you; you're going to hurt yourself."

"I-I need to prepare, Madoka," Homura tells her softly. "T-There's so many things to do. There's only two weeks left—less. Y-You don't understand, Walpurgisnacht is—"

"Stop it," Madoka cuts her off, pulling her close. "You're going to have another panic attack—relax. Relax, Homura-chan."

Homura tries to slow her rapid breathing, concentrating on how warm Madoka is. On how familiar it is to be held by her.

"Relax," Madoka murmurs, hands running down Homura's back.

Amy headbutts Homura at the back of her head. "Meow."

"S-Shh, A-Amy," Homura stammers out.

Madoka continues to hold her, until her breaths calm, and she finally relaxes.

She sighs. "One hour, Homura-chan."

Homura pulls away to look at her.

"You can patrol... for one hour. I'm sure one hour is enough for you...?"

Homura blinks, quickly catching on. "T-Thank you, Madoka."

Madoka sighs, even though there's a smile on her lips. "Grr, I can't win against you, Homura-chan."

"M-Madoka...?"

"Mama and Papa are still awake though. So you should at least wait until they're sleeping."

Homura nods. "Did you want me to help you with your homework?"

Madoka suddenly holds her closer. "Homura-chan..."

"Y-Yes, Madoka...?"

"You'll stay safe, right?"

"Y-Yes, of course."

"Promise me," Madoka whispers. "Promise me you'll be safe."

"Madoka...?"

"It's weird..." Madoka tells her. "It's... you're right here. I can hear your heartbeat... I can touch you. But it always feels like you're so far away, Homura-chan... Like you're always one step ahead. Like... you're just waiting... and then, you're going to leave, to some place far, far away..."

Homura wraps her arms around Madoka. "I-I'm right here, Madoka."

Madoka doesn't reply, hugging Homura tightly.

She notices it—that Homura doesn't promise anything.

Neither her safety, nor that she's going to stay.

Madoka closes her eyes.

"Madoka...? D-Did you want me to help you with your homework...?"

"...Let's stay like this for a while longer, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

/

An hour, Homura finds, is both short, and long.

But more than the hour, it's the fact that she's alone, by herself, that she notices the most.

Things, before this timeline... cycles, were always like this hour.

Her, alone, roaming the darkened streets. The click of her high heels echoing off the pavement, everything else a muffle of sounds as she focuses on her one goal.

Alone.

Always alone.

Alone for so long, that there was nothing to keep her on the path; she has known for a while now that she had already gotten lost, a long, long time ago.

Her goal had never changed; Madoka is, and will always be at the end.

But her path... the windy, overgrown path that she had wandered off into to reach her goal—that was the problem.

Now, as she overlooks the city from one of the highest buildings downtown, there's a moment of clarity in her eyes.

She tilts her head back, bathing her face in pale moonlight.

Maybe... it's better to not be alone.

\

30 minutes gone, and her footsteps are non hurried as she continues her way through the city.

There's a certain familiarity here as the darkness covers her, seemingly like a black curtain drawn upon a large stage; her, the sole performer, acting through a play painfully burned into her mind.

And despite it all, Homura finds, that she quite likes night time.

She can appreciate the city lights, those bright stars twinkling in a sea of cold cement structures. How the shadows flicker, contracting and shifting as she walks past street lamps, shining with tints ranging from blue, to orange, to white.

She likes how the normal, busy lifestyles are lulled as most of the city sleeps.

It's quiet, and she can recognize the sounds around her: random strays prowling the city, lonely cars heading to their destinations.

And though her ears perk at the rustles and scratches that makes her want to lick her lips, she thinks back to Madoka, and knows she wouldn't appreciate it if she came back, stomach full and teeth stained.

Her musings are interrupted as she hears a loud voice. She slinks back into the shadows, hidden, as a lone drunk wanders through the streets; rare, at least in these parts, but not unheard of.

Her tail flickers—eyes watching as he steps closer to the barrier waiting for him.

A familiar.

She sighs, and time clicks to a stop.

She heads over with determined steps, hands already reaching into her shield for her sub machine gun.

/

10 minutes left, and Homura remains crouched, ears perked and tail flickering as she decides on her last task before she heads back.

She has already dealt with 2 familiars, one witch, and restocked some ammunition and weapons. She knows a few more places she can hit—there's an illegal underground weapon ring in one of the poorer sectors in the city—but—

Her eyes narrow, and her head turns when she feels it.

There's a low growl in her throat, and her teeth grit angrily.

10 minutes... 10 minutes is plenty of time.

Her eyes glint dangerously, and she quickly takes off, following the familiar signature:

Kyuubey is still wandering the city, and has made the mistake of stepping into her range.

\

When Homura silently climbs in through Madoka's window, she's not at all surprised to see the other girl is sitting at her desk.

Madoka had told her, she would be waiting until she came back.

She looks to the clock: 2am.

Exactly one hour.

But, it had obviously been an hour too long for Madoka, as she is now asleep on her desk, light tilted down to avoid alerting her parents.

Homura stares, wondering if she should wake her up, or just carry her to bed.

"...meow."

Homura's eyes widen at Amy's comment. A glance back to the sleeping Madoka, and she decides there's no harm in taking a quick shower.

She clicks time to a standstill, quickly grabs a change of clothes, and heads to the bathroom.

/

Madoka stirs when she feels hands around her. Her eyes open blearily, but it's too dark that she can't make out the figure that she realizes is now carrying her. She lifts her hand, reaching out to touch their chin, effectively stopping them in their place.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you, Madoka?"

The familiar voice has her smiling, and she closes her eyes. "Welcome back, Homura-chan," she murmurs sleepily. "What time is it?"

"...2:05," Homura responds softly.

"...Good girl," Madoka tells her. She snuggles closer, but pauses when she can smell soap and shampoo on her. "Did you take a shower...?"

"Y-Yes. I didn't take one earlier... remember?"

Madoka nods. "Yeah..." she mumbles. She thinks nothing more of it as Homura lowers her to the bed. "Did you get a lot done in an hour?" she asks.

"Mmhmm. Lots."

"That's good... I'll stay up for sure next time..."

Homura pulls the blanket up around them. "You're already falling back asleep, Madoka."

"...I can stay up," Madoka pouts, eyes still closed.

"I believe you." Homura settles into her spot, Madoka automatically reaching over, hands fumbling as they search for Homura's waist.

Once found, she presses herself close. "Goodnight, Homura-chan..."

"Goodnight, Madoka."

She promptly falls asleep, exhaustion washing over her, enabling her to sleep until the alarm finally wakes them up.

\\

Homura trails after Madoka, following her to the bathroom for their usual morning routine.

Junko is already there, in front of the sinks, hair still a mess and looking nothing like the polished business woman that everyone, minus her family, is used to.

"Morning, Homura," Junko greets her.

As usual, Homura averts her eyes. "G-Good morning, Junko-san," she replies quietly.

She reaches over for her toothbrush, but a hand on her forehead stops her movements as she stiffens.

"Are you feeling better today?" Junko asks, brushing Homura's bangs back as she checks her temperature.

Madoka watches as Homura rocks slightly on her heels, no doubt body stiff as she forces herself not to move away.

"Y-Yes," Homura mumbles, cheeks flushing. "I'm fine. T-Thank you, Junko-san."

"Hmm," Junko eyes her critically. "Well, you do seem better today. If you aren't feeling well though, I can call in sick for you."

Homura shakes her head. "N-No, I'm fine. T-Thank you, Junko-san."

Junko finally pulls away, and Homura visibly relaxes.

Junko turns to her daughter. "Madoka."

Toothbrush in one hand, a tube of toothpaste in another, she looks up. "Yes, Mama?"

"I want you two to come home right after school, alright? I can understand how you want to work harder for gym, but I don't want either of you pushing yourselves sick."

Madoka guiltily looks down, but not for the reasons that Junko thinks.

She blinks when a hand is atop her head, and she releases a cry of protest when her mother deliberately messes up her hair.

"Mama!"

Junko grins, and reaches for her own toothbrush.

/

"Meow."

Homura is pulling on her jacket when Amy's voice surprises her. She fixes her hair, before turning to the cat that usually has trouble waking up before 8am.

"...I am fine."

"Meow."

"...It was a momentary lapse of judgement... It's healing."

"...meow."

Homura approaches the desk, kneeling when she's standing in front of it.

Amy crawls out of her bed, padding over to Homura.

"I will be fine, Amy."

"Meow," Amy rubs her face against Homura's cheek. "Meow."

"Yes, I know. Thank you for worrying about me." Homura places a hand on Amy's head, petting her softly.

"Meow."

Homura's hand pauses.

"Meow."

"Mm... but Madoka doesn't want me to..."

"Meoow."

"...I am not."

"Homura-chan? Are you done changing?"

Homura frowns at Amy and straightens up. "Yes, I am done, Madoka," she calls out.

The door opens and Madoka enters. She immediately notices Amy sitting on the desk, and the frown on Homura's face.

"Are you arguing with Amy again?" Madoka asks, making her way over to grab her bag and Homura.

"N-No," Homura denies.

"Meow."

Madoka smiles, hands reaching for the reason she came into her room. "We'll see you later, Amy. Come on, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay, Madoka."

"Meow."

Homura stares at Amy as she's dragged out the door.

"Meow."

/

"Sayaka, are you sure you're feeling well enough today? Maybe you should take another day off—"

Sayaka sighs, barely able to keep her annoyance in check. "Yes, for the last time, I'm fine!"

"Sayaka." Her father's stern voice has her rolling her eyes, though she makes sure to face away from them when she does so.

"I'm fine," she repeats, more for her mother's benefit. "You already checked my temperature, and my appetite is fine. I ate everything you cooked! Do you want me to dance to show you that I'm okay? Because I can!"

Her mother gives her an exasperated sigh. "Alright, I believe you. If you have enough energy to argue with me about this, then you are definitely feeling better."

Sayaka throws up her hands. "Thank you!"

Her father clears his throat. "Remember, you are to come home right after school. You are grounded for two weeks."

"How could I forget," she mutters under her breath.

"Sayaka."

She looks up to see her mother with her hands on her hips, and a frown on her face.

She sighs. "Yes. I understand," she tells them. "If there's nothing else, I need to get to school. If that is alright with you, Mother dearest? Father dearest?"

Her sarcasm earns her disapproving looks, but she misses them when she turns away to face the door.

She pauses, mid stride, and turns back.

"Did you forget something?" her mother asks, hands full as she collects the dishware from breakfast.

Sayaka remains quiet as she walks over.

"Sayaka?"

To their surprise, Sayaka leans in and gives her mother a quick hug.

"Sayaka...?"

She moves over and does the same to her father.

"I'm sorry," she says as she steps away.

Her parents exchange worried looks.

"Saya—"

"I'm off!" One arm held up, Sayaka rushes out the door, leaving her bewildered parents to stare after her.

\

"Sayaka-san, are you feeling better today?"

Sayaka turns to Hitomi, grin on her face. "Yeah! A lot better! Sorry for making you worry, Hitomi!"

Hitomi nods slowly. "That's good to hear, Sayaka-san. Especially considering how you weren't feeling well enough for visitors yesterday, I was afraid your sickness would be something a lot worse."

"Ahh," Sayaka gives her a sheepish smile, hand scratching at the back of her head. "Yeah, I wasn't feeling too hot yesterday. But seriously, when I woke up this morning, I felt a lot better! It was like, an amazing revival! Plus, it's so boring at home, and I didn't really feel like getting nagged by my mom again. I just had to come to school! Who knew I'd start to miss it!"

Hitomi nods again. "About that, Sayaka-san, there's—"

Sayaka quickly interrupts. "Could you lend me your notes from yesterday, Hitomi?"

"Ah. Yes, of course. But—"

"Thanks! You are the best! Hey! There's Madoka and transfer student!" Sayaka turns away, waving at the approaching girls.

"Sayaka-san—"

"They're at it again," Sayaka comments lightly.

Out of reflex, Hitomi looks over, and once again she sees their hands are clasped. "They held hands yesterday as well," she murmurs.

Sayaka grins, leaning in. "You think there's something going on between them?"

There's a gasp as her reply. Hitomi is now staring at Madoka and Homura very closely.

"Uhm, is there something wrong, Hitomi-chan...?" Madoka asks when she notices her narrowed eyes.

"You two!" Hitomi points. "I knew it!"

Sayaka breathes a sigh of relief, tuning out Hitomi's ridiculous tirade about 'forbidden relationships.'

She notices Homura staring and shrugs.

It takes a few minutes for Madoka to calm Hitomi down, before they're once again making their way towards school.

They split into pairs, and Sayaka overtakes the flow of conversation with her exuberance on last night's drama.

At this point, Homura's the first to notice, but stays quiet as they continue walking.

It's when they're almost there, closer to the gates, that the whispers pick up in volume as a familiar name is tossed around.

Kamijou Kyousuke.

It immediately draws everyone's attention—especially Sayaka's. She listens closely as a pair of girls from 2C walk past as they gossip the latest news.

"They're calling it a miracle actually," the first girl tells her friend. "All of a sudden, he's fine, and there's talk about him having a return concert or something."

"Isn't that kind of weird though?" her friend points out. "One day he's in the hospital, and the next he's not? Sounds kind of suspicious to me. Maybe his accident was a publicity stunt or something."

That comment has Sayaka narrowing her eyes and jaw clenching in anger. The two random girls are unaware and merely drift further away from her until they're no longer within ear-shot.

"Sayaka-chan?"

Madoka's voice draws her out from her anger and she gives her a weak smile. "Y-Yeah..."

Hitomi glances at Sayaka, equally worried, but her words fade as she notices an approaching figure in the distance.

"Kamijou-kun..." Hitomi whispers, and Sayaka's sharpened ears hear.

Her head snaps up to search for the boy she became a magical girl for.

He's there, flanked by two boys in their same class. He looks perfectly healthy as he walks: he has no crutches, there's no limp, and there's even a relaxed smile on his face.

Somehow, though their distance is wide, he catches sight of a flicker of blue and their eyes meet. It lasts only for a brief moment, and when he turns away, Sayaka feels that knife in her heart twist in even deeper.

Madoka wants to say something, but before she can, the other girl is pretending nothing had happened, and continues heading towards the school.

"Sayaka-chan..."

Hitomi shakes her head. "We should follow, Madoka-san," she murmurs.

Madoka nods, tightening her grip on Homura's hand as they trail after Sayaka.

Homura glances down to her bag, where there's a grief seed waiting to be used.

She has a feeling that Sayaka will need it before the school day is over.

/

Homura never really did like how their gym classes are held right before lunch, but it doesn't mean she'd prefer them after, either.

It doesn't matter to her, though, at least not today.

After changing in the Nurse's office, she meets Madoka halfway, and they continue to the outside field where their class is taking place.

Madoka immediately notices the note in her hand. "What's that, Homura-chan?"

"Mm, I asked the nurse to write me an excuse for today's class," she replies, showing Madoka the paper.

Madoka looks at her in worry.

Homura shakes her head. "I'm fine. I just don't feel like participating today."

Madoka frowns, not at all believing her.

"...I'm feeling a bit tired," Homura admits. "And since I have this, I will use it."

Madoka relaxes a little at her words. "Does this mean you're not going to patrol tonight?"

Homura glances away.

Madoka sighs. "One hour."

She nods in agreement. "One hour."

When they reach the track, Homura shows the instructor her note.

He barely even looks at it, quickly waving her away.

Homura heads over to sit in the shade as Madoka joins Sayaka and Hitomi.

\

Homura finds herself starting to nod off when a towel is draped over her head.

She blinks, moving the cloth away and peers up.

Madoka is smiling down at her, and there's a sudden sense of deja vu that keeps Homura staring even as Madoka takes a seat.

"Homura-chan? Are you alright?"

Homura jumps, startled out of her reverie. "Y-Yes, I am fine, Madoka."

Madoka glances at her. "Alright..." She really wants to grab Homura's hand—but they're in school, so she settles for sitting a bit closer without being too obvious.

"Did your turn already pass, Madoka?" Homura asks as she watches a random girl raise her hand, signaling she's about to begin her first attempt at the high jump; she hadn't been paying attention at all.

"Y-Yeah."

Homura looks at her in curiosity.

"I couldn't clear it, like always," Madoka tells her with a frown. "Though, I was really close this time!"

"You'll get it soon, Madoka. Considering your shorter stature compared to most of the students, it is a bit unfair to hold you to the standard average."

Madoka sighs. "I've been getting bad marks in gym since elementary school though. And this was back then, when everyone is around the same height... What about you, Homura-chan?"

"Hm?" Homura watches as the girl knocks over the bar at the last second, earning her a groan from her audience. "What about me, Madoka?"

Madoka suddenly feels not so bad about her earlier jump; the other girl couldn't clear the same height as her.

"Before you transferred here, what school did you go?" Madoka asks. "How was it there? I've... never really asked about those kinds of things..."

Homura casts her eyes skyward. It felt so long ago.

It takes her a moment to find an answer. "Well, I attended a Christian School in Tokyo... it was... a bit different, as we had different rules, and certain classes relating to religion added to our curriculum..."

"That sounds interesting."

Homura shakes her head. "The instructors were very strict. I prefer the ones here."

"They were that bad?" Madoka asks, curious.

"Well," Homura leans back on her hands, "I was absent quite a bit, because I was so sick, so I didn't really experience much. But, it was definitely different from here."

A familiar weight on her hand. Homura glances down, not at all surprised to see Madoka's hand on top of hers.

"I'm glad you transferred here, Homura-chan."

"...Me too, Madoka."

"H—"

Sudden cheers erupt from the field, and they both turn to look.

"Seems like something's happening on the boys' side," Homura murmurs, eyes looking across the field to where the guys are doing vaulting exercises.

Ever curious, Madoka stands, trying to get a clearer view. "You can see from here, Homura-chan?" She squints, trying to look past the crowd.

More cheers, now from both the girls and guys.

"I'm going to go see what's happening. I'll be right back, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, quickly making her way back to the field.

Homura closes her eyes, and lowers her body to the ground. The grass tickles her exposed skin, but she ignores it.

Her eyes open, and the sky greets her.

She's not sure how much time passes, just that she's still staring when a shadow passes overhead.

Madoka.

"Are you okay, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, kneeling next to her.

"...The sky is blue, Madoka."

Madoka tilts her head, looking up. "Yes it is, Homura-chan."

Homura holds her hand out, reaching. "...Has it always been this blue, Madoka?"

Madoka grabs Homura's outstretched hand, linking their fingers together automatically. "What colour is the sky to you normally, Homura-chan...?"

Homura stares, eyes seeing something further, farther. Beyond. "...I'm not sure, Madoka."

Something about Homura's expression has Madoka's heart clenching painfully. "...It's blue, Homura-chan."

"Blue...?"

Madoka nods. "Blue."

"I see..." Homura finally turns to her. "Did you find out what was happening?"

"Mm... it was Kamijou-kun... he managed to clear 7 boxes."

"Hm."

Madoka smiles. "You don't sound that impressed?"

"Males have stronger muscles than females; it is not an amazing feat."

Madoka glances over to the field. "Yeah... but, up until a few days ago, Kamijou-kun was in the hospital... and now he's clearing 7 boxes in gym... when he could barely even walk..."

"People are easily impressed."

Madoka nods. "Yeah..."

Homura sits up, stray blades of grass sticking to her uniform. She ignores them, but Madoka notices. She moves, shuffling on her knees, until she's behind Homura and helps brush her shirt clean.

"Did something else happen?" Homura asks, sensing there's something that Madoka saw on the field that is bothering her.

"... Hitomi-chan and Sayaka-chan were competing with the high jump..."

Homura remains quiet.

"Hitomi-chan's really good at the high jump, you know?"

Homura nods.

"So, she's always setting the records—at least for our class. And whenever she jumps, the cheers from the other girls always gains the boys' attention. Sayaka-chan... is pretty good, but Hitomi-chan is usually better than her."

Homura can already understand where this is going. "Ah. Miki Sayaka set a new record?"

Madoka blinks. "Y-Yes. Were you watching, Homura-chan?"

Homura shakes her head. "Not at all."

Madoka's fingers gently lift a few strands of Homura's long hair. "...Did you feel her use her magic?"

"A little."

Madoka sighs. "It's... I think she was deliberately competing with Hitomi-chan for some reason. Did something happen between her and Hitomi-chan...?"

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

Madoka's still playing with her hair, but she doesn't mind. "If your friend liked the same person as you, what would you do?"

Madoka doesn't reply. Instead, she moves until she's once more taking a seat besides Homura.

Homura watches her. "Madoka?"

"...I'm not sure," Madoka says, eyes staring out into the field. "If someone liked the same person I did... I..."

"Would you give up?"

Madoka quickly turns to her. "...Give up?"

"So that your friend could have them?"

Madoka frowns. "Give up... on the person I liked...?"

Homura tilts her head. "It's a hypothetical question, Madoka."

Madoka doesn't hear her. "Give up...?" She looks at Homura, searching those lavender eyes that are curiously staring back. "...No. I wouldn't give up. Not... not until I knew for sure, that they were never mine."

Homura blinks, not at all understanding why Madoka is eying her so closely. "I see."

She turns back to the field.

Madoka stares, wondering why Homura had asked her that question. Her eyes widen. "Wait. Are you saying Hitomi-chan likes Kamjiou-kun too...?"

Homura faces her. "...So it's not something you've noticed?"

Madoka shakes her head. "No! Not at all! T-They hardly even talk to each other! And... Hitomi-chan never goes with us when Sayaka-chan visits Kamijou-kun. When did that even happen...?"

"Regardless, Miki Sayaka needs to finally put to rest the last of her inner demons. She has stabilized, and this may be the most lucid I've ever seen of her..."

"Hitomi-chan likes Kamijou-kun...?" Madoka looks to the field, eyes wandering until she finds that familiar green towering slightly over the other girls: Hitomi is one of the tallest girls in their class. "But... who does Kamijou-kun like...?"

There's a shrill whistle as her answer: class is now over.

Madoka searches the crowd that's walking to the changing rooms, but is unable to spot that shade of blue.

"Hm? Where's Sayaka-chan?"

She sees Hitomi approaching, and when the taller girl notices they have spotted her, she gives them a polite smile.

"Madoka-san, Akemi-san. Shall we head to the changing rooms, and then to lunch?"

Madoka glances at her, thoughts of Kyousuke running through her mind. "Uhm, Hitomi-chan, where's Sayaka-chan?"

Hitomi casts a look behind her shoulder. "The coach had something to ask Sayaka-san. I believe they are discussing possible recruitment for the track team..." She turns back to them with a knowing smile. "The coach tends to ask anyone who is proficient in sports this question."

"Ah," Madoka nods.

"...He also pulled aside Kamijou-kun," Hitomi adds in.

Madoka eyes widen. "W-What?"

Hitomi glances back to the field, and the other two turn to see that the coach is trekking closer, a prominent frown on his face: his request most likely turned down.

"They're... where are they?" Madoka asks, looking around in worry.

Sayaka and Kyousuke are nowhere to be found.

"Sayaka-san has been eying Kamijou-kun all morning, Madoka-san," Hitomi tells her. "Perhaps, it would be best if we were to leave them alone?"

Madoka turns to her. "Hitomi-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka-san?"

"Do... do you like Kamijou-kun as well...?"

To her surprise, Hitomi sighs. "Madoka-san, you... are aware of how my father and Kamijou-kun's father are friends?"

Madoka blinks. "U-Uhm, t-they went to the same university...?"

Hitomi nods, eyes moving to stare across the now empty field. "Yes. They were both business majors at Tokyo University. Their backgrounds were quite similar, so they instantly clicked with one another..."

"Hitomi-chan...?"

"I've met Kamijou-kun on a few occasions, when we were younger, before I met you and Sayaka-san," Hitomi tells her. "Holiday parties... things like that. But we never really talked much... I have always been taking many different lessons ever since I was younger. Ballet, flower arrangement. Calligraphy, traditional dance..." She sighs once more. "Piano. Kamijou-kun and I attend the same music school."

Hitomi tucks a few strands of hair behind her ear.

"We have never really talked," Hitomi emphasizes, turning back to Madoka. "Not really, until his accident. At first, I was visiting him out of obligation—for my parents, you understand? They were too busy to visit in person, and I was sent in their stead."

Madoka nods, showing her she understands.

"And we... kind of clicked... I suppose. Our situations are... similar. We are both from prominent families and we both understand the obligations that we need to fulfill because of our social standing. It's... You and Sayaka-san are my two closest friends," Hitomi tells her, "but Kamijou-kun is... different, because we are similar."

Hitomi shakes her head.

"My family... my father especially, is very traditional. In the sense of customs and such... Somehow, our parents... perhaps it was my fault. For mentioning him and showing interest..."

Homura can feel it, Sayaka's signature stepping closer. She turns to the field and Sayaka appears, face blank as she walks across.

Hitomi and Madoka both notice.

As if sensing their gaze, Sayaka looks up, immediately locking on green eyes.

Hitomi continues staring, meeting Sayaka's glare head on. "Especially since his remarkable recovery... Our parents... there's... there's been talk, about them arranging our betrothal."

Madoka eyes widen. "W-What?"

Hitomi's lips are pressed thin and her eyes are hard. "When we turn 18, they want us to be marrie**d."**

AN: TWISTER. Hitomi's random crush on Kyousuke was always so strange. Like, where did it come from even? I don't know, but I'm making stuff up now. Haha.

I have a vague idea of where I want to take things, but—

Thanks again for reading/reviewing :) And for the advice, and helpful comments! And random critiques here and there. :) One day, I should really answer questions brought up. Perhaps towards the end and when I'm feeling not as lazy. I read them! I do! Sorry! Thanks again!

Chapter 20: oasis

"Do you love him?"

Hitomi glances away. She takes in the sight of the empty race track around them, before her green eyes once more meet those light blues that are swirling with emotions.

And she finds that anger, is definitely in the forefront.

"Love... is a very strong word, Sayaka-san," Hitomi replies, voice quiet.

Sayaka makes a sound in her throat—halfway between a choked cry and a rough growl.

"Do you *like* him then?" she spits out.

Hitomi does not respond, and merely closes her eyes. Lunch is almost half over, and they still needed to change out of their gym clothes.

She also knows that Madoka and Homura are waiting somewhere nearby.

She opens her eyes. "Did you confess? To Kamijou-kun?"

The question is unexpected, and Hitomi watches as Sayaka sputters about.

"W-What?" she finally manages to ask after a few botched attempts.

"Did you confess your feelings to Kamijou-kun?" Hitomi repeats once more. "You were behind there for a while. Did you confess?"

Sayaka scowls at her persistence, and crosses her arms across her chest. Her body language tells Hitomi that she's on the defense, meaning that she most likely did not.

"That has nothing to do with you."

Hitomi gives her a polite smile. "Doesn't it though, Sayaka-san? Kamijou-kun... will become my potential suitor. Fiance." She tucks her hair behind her ear, face calm even though she can't say the same about her mind. "Did you confess to him?"

Sayaka looks down to the floor. Her hands unconsciously tighten into fists, and she can't deny how much she wants to reach out and— She can feel it—how the emotions are twisting in her heart. She quickly clamps down on them, teeth mashing together.

"No," she tells her, voice cracking. "I—couldn't."

"I see."

Sayaka shakes her head. "What, does it even matter, anyways? E-Even if I were to tell him, it's not like it would do anything. You're the one he's going to marry. You're—"

"It's not set in stone, Sayaka-san."

"Hitomi...?"

"We are still young. Barely in our second year of middle school. The aspect of marriage at our age, is something that I can't begin to even wrap my own mind around. Do you love him, Sayaka-san?"

The question thrown back into her face has Sayaka flinching. "I..."

Hitomi sighs. "More often than not, my conversations with Kamijou-kun... eventually, they end with you."

"What?"

Hitomi smiles. "It's not surprising, really, is it? We can only carry on conversation about music for so long. Other than our similar lifestyles, and perhaps interest in music, we have nothing else in common. Nothing, really, except for you. Kamijou-kun, often talks about the admiration he has for you. How he wishes to have the courage you have. How your optimism gives him strength..."

Sayaka can only stare.

The smile falls from Hitomi's face. "I wonder how he would think of the you right now, at this moment. The 'brave' Sayaka-san, that is continuously running away. Where is your usual courage, Sayaka-san?"

"Wha—"

Hitomi shakes her head. "Forget about the arranged marriage for a moment, Sayaka-san. Why haven't you confessed your love for him?"

Sayaka scowls. "I told you—it's not your pro—"

"Yes it is!" Hitomi stomps her foot, voice echoing across the empty field. "Maybe I do like him, Sayaka-san. But, you are also my friend. And as you have had your eye on him first, you... you deserve the opportunity to confess first. I have no intention of stealing him from you."

Sayaka glares, eyes turning away.

"I want this to be fair, Sayaka-san," Hitomi tells her. "Who's to say that Kamijou-kun doesn't like you back? Maybe—"

"What does it even matter!?" Sayaka shouts. "I'm not—" she chokes back her words. "I can't..." she whispers. "I'm not even..."

"You're not what?" Hitomi demands. "I don't understand! You were so close, just a few days ago! What changed?"

There's a flare of anger and Hitomi steps back at Sayaka's expression. "Everything changed! What would you know?! We all can't be as amazing or as lucky as you, Hitomi! What would *you* know about what I'm going through?"

"Then tell me! How am I supposed to understand if you don't say anything? You and Madoka-san, both of you have been hiding something from me. Don't think I haven't noticed! After meeting Tomoe-san... No, after Akemi-san arrived. There's... something going on in your little group."

A bitter laugh from Sayaka. "You think I want to be this way...?" she steps forward, slowly raising her hands. "I was doing fine, really... I'm not supposed to regret anything. But," her eyes stare straight at Hitomi, "every time I look at you..."

"Sayaka-san...?"

"Why... you?" Sayaka asks, still moving forward. "Why is it always you...?"

Hitomi takes another step back. "Sayaka-san? What's wrong?" It reminds her of what she had seen on the roof—and it scares her. "A-Are you feeling ill again? Do you need to see the nurse?"

"Why...?"

Hitomi's eyes widen when Sayaka's hand suddenly shoots out, fingers wrapping around her wrist.

"Sayaka-san? W-What are you doing?"

"What happens..." Sayaka says softly, "to a normal person...?"

"Saya—"

"Miki Sayaka."

Hitomi finds her wrist free, with Madoka next to her. Homura is there, in front, staring at Sayaka with narrowed eyes.

"...Yo, transfer student." Sayaka looks at her. "This is none of your business. Why don't you and Madoka head to lunch, hm? This is between me and Hitomi..."

"...You truly are an idiot," Homura replies. "Do you not understand what you were about to do?"

Sayaka smirks. "No, I know exactly what I was about to do."

"You—"

"Homura-chan." A hand on her shirt, tugging her back.

Homura glances over. "Madoka?"

Madoka is not looking at her, however, and is instead watching Sayaka. "...There's not much time left until lunch ends."

Homura nods. "You and Shizuki Hitomi should—"

Madoka turns to her with a smile. "After you change, can you get me a strawberry milk, Homura-chan? I'll meet you outside, right in front of the main building. Can you also message Mami-chan, and apologize to her, and explain why we weren't there for lunch?"

Homura blinks. "Madoka?"

The smaller girl ignores her, and turns to Hitomi. "Hitomi-chan?"

"Y-Yes, Madoka-san?"

"I... know... things have been... changing between us lately. But... it's not because we're deliberately shutting you out. If... maybe... one day, maybe we'll be able to explain it to you, but, please, please know that you're still our friend. And I'm sorry, if we've been making you feel lonely."

Hitomi looks at her, clearly surprised. "Ah..."

"Can you please take Homura-chan with you, to get changed? I need to speak to Sayaka-chan for a bit."

Homura reaches out to grab her arm. "Mado—"

Madoka intercepts her hand, and links their fingers together. "Homura-chan. Please? Don't worry." Pink eyes flicker over to blue. "Sayaka-chan won't hurt me."

Those words has Sayaka flinching.

Homura frowns. "She is—"

"My best friend," Madoka emphasizes.

"But—"

Madoka pats her hand, before she lets go. "Strawberry milk, okay, Homura-chan?"

"Mado—"

"Hitomi-chan?"

Hitomi grabs Homura's arm. "Let's leave them alone, Akemi-san."

"Wait, Mado—"

"Homura-chan."

They stare at one another, and even though Homura doesn't want to, she eventually backs down. "...Alright."

Madoka nods. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

Hitomi drags Homura away, and finally, it's just Madoka and Sayaka.

"Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka sighs. "Just... leave me alone, alright, Madoka? I need to—"

"No."

"What?" Sayaka looks over, to see Madoka glaring at her.

"No," she repeats. "I won't leave you alone. Not when you're like *this*. Not yet, until I tell you what I need to say."

A shadow passes over Sayaka's eyes. "And what right do you have—"

Madoka lifts her chin. "Mami-chan. Kyouko-chan. Homura-chan. They've been trying to help you. Trying to get you through this, yet you keep falling, no matter how many times they pick you up!"

"What would you—"

"...I never thought you could be so selfish, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka blinks when she realizes that Madoka is crying.

"Everyone's been trying their best," Madoka says, wiping her eyes with her open palm. "Everyone, but you. For you, everything is about you. And only you!"

"Wha—"

"I want to help you, Sayaka-chan." She sniffles, and wipes more tears away. "You're my best friend. And I have always looked up to you, because you're brave, and nice, and I have always wanted to be more like you."

Madoka shakes her head.

"But—the you, that I have been seeing lately, is not the Sayaka-chan that I know."

"Well sorry," Sayaka sneers, "that I can't pretend to be happy all the time! You're just like Hitomi, trying to act like you understand what I'm going through!"

"Then tell me, so that I can understand! How can I make it so that you'll be happy again, Sayaka-chan!"

Sayaka reaches for her. "Mado—"

Madoka takes a step back, dodging her hand. It's the fear in her eyes that has Sayaka staring at her in shock.

"Sayaka-chan... Just being here, next to you, scares me," Madoka whispers. "The Sayaka-chan I know, would never hurt me. But—you. I'm not sure if I can trust you anymore. Not after what you did to Kyouko-chan. Not after what you did to Homura-chan." She takes another step back. "Not after what you tried to do to Hitomi-chan."

Sayaka bows her head, the anger inside her slowly unraveling. "...What do you want me to do...? I can't..." she gestures helplessly.

"...Homura-chan... she said, that you need to confess to Kamijou-kun."

Sayaka gathers her face in her hands. "...I can't," she chokes out. "Even if he likes me back... Him and Hitomi—"

"...Then give up on him."

Sayaka lifts her head.

"It's one thing, or another, Sayaka-chan. You can't continue wavering with your feelings. Can't you see how much it's affecting you? How much it's affecting everyone around you?"

"It's not that easy!"

"Don't you understand what's going to happen to you, Sayaka-chan?" Madoka asks, lips trembling. "Ever since we were little, you have always been protecting me. When I was sad, you were always there to make me smile again. I want to help you, like you always help me," she swipes at her eyes in frustration, "but all you do is push everyone away. Tell me, how I can help you, Sayaka-chan. ...I-I'll make a wish for you, if that's what you want."

Her earnest words makes Sayaka's stomach drop.

"Madoka..." Sayaka raises her hands, but when she realizes what she's doing, she quickly forces them back to her side. "I..." she closes her eyes. "I'm an idiot, aren't I...? I'm... What am I doing...?"

"Sayaka-chan..."

"Madoka... Thank you." Her eyes open, and Madoka can see they're finally clear. "I... " Sayaka takes a deep breath. "Madoka, can you leave me alone for a while...?"

"S-Sayaka-chan..."

Sayaka shakes her head. Suddenly, her soul gem is in her hand, and she holds it out for Madoka to see. "I'm... I'm okay. I'll be okay, so please... I... I need to think about things. Alone. Please."

Madoka sniffles again. The only reason she agrees, is because Sayaka's gem is still blue. "...Okay."

"Thank you, Madoka."

Madoka moves to turn around, but stops. "Sayaka-chan..." There's a nervous expression on her face. "I'll, see you later...?"

Sayaka nods. "Yeah, of course."

Madoka gives her one last look, before she walks away.

/

Hitomi glances behind her, to where she can see the usual blank faced Homura.

Except—she sees how she keeps looking over her shoulder.

Hitomi stops walking, and the distracted Homura almost runs into her. She abruptly stops right before impact, and automatically takes a few steps back.

They stare at one another, Homura with her head tilted, Hitomi eying her with poorly disguised jealousy.

"...Is something the matter, Shizuki Hitomi?"

That strange naming, has Hitomi pausing. She thinks, and the only one that Homura calls by her first name, is Madoka.

Hitomi looks away. "I'm... jealous of you, Akemi-san."

Homura blinks, while Hitomi frowns at her slip of the tongue.

"...Why?"

Hitomi turns back. "Why...?" It's a good question. "Why?" she repeats.

Homura stands still facing her, but Hitomi can see her attention is drifting away—towards the direction they had come from.

Hitomi shakes her head. "You..." She sighs. "You have only been here for... weeks, Akemi-san. And yet... it already seems like you're replacing me."

Homura doesn't reply. Very rarely does she interact with Hitomi, no matter what timeline.

The silence lasts long enough that Hitomi eventually sighs once more. "I'm... going to get changed," she tells her, already turning around. "I will see you in class, Akemi-san."

Homura grabs her arm, and pulls her back.

"Akemi-san...?"

"...Are you happy, Shizuki Hitomi?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"With your life?" Homura clarifies.

Hitomi's brow furrows. "...There is nothing unsatisfactory about it, if that's what you're asking me."

Homura stares at her, searching for something in her eyes. Finally, she nods, and lets go. "Good. Don't... don't go throwing all of that away, for something... that sounds too good to be true."

Her cryptic words merely draw a puzzled expression onto Hitomi's face. "What do you mean by that, Akemi-san?"

Homura shakes her head. "I need to get changed as well," she murmurs. "Good day, Shizuki Hitomi."

Before Hitomi can stop her, Homura is walking away briskly, her long hair trailing after her like a dark cape.

Hitomi doesn't know what to think, but she merely turns around, and heads to the changing rooms.

\\

Five minutes until the bell chimes, and Homura is finished with her two boxes of milk. There's one more in her hand as she waits outside, head tilted up, eyes watching.

Her bentou, along with Madoka's, is sitting neatly in Madoka's bag in their classroom, and the milk is barely enough to keep her hunger down. Her tongue pokes out a little as her eyes continue to follow the birds in the nearby trees.

Amy had told her that those are harder to catch—but just as delicious.

She slowly walks over, watching as they flutter about. When she's standing right below them, her hand is placed on the tree trunk, and she knows it would be really easy for her to scale up. A quick activation of her time magic, and, her eyes flicker around, she could eat all three before Madoka arrives.

Instead, she sighs, eyes closing as she leans her forehead against the rough, yet cool surface of the bark.

"...Homura-chan?"

She straightens, and turns to face the owner of that voice. "Mado—" her greeting dies on her lips when she sees how miserable Madoka looks. "A-Are you alright, Madoka?"

"I-I'm okay, Homura-chan." She gives her a watery smile.

Homura can only offer her the box of milk as comfort.

Madoka gives her a better smile this time. "Thanks, Homura-chan."

A moment later, Madoka is drinking her lunch, eyes looking first to Homura, then into the branches above.

She's done with half, before she pulls the straw away. "...What were you doing, Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks, but when one of the birds chirps, lavender is suddenly concentrated up.

Madoka grabs her hand. "Birds are off limits too, Homura-chan."

The look Homura gives her has Madoka reaching out, but she stops herself when she remembers where they're at. Petting Homura at school is definitely a no-no.

She loops her arm with Homura's instead, and tugs her towards the classrooms. "You can eat your bentou during break after our next class, Homura-chan."

"Mm..." Homura replies, almost reluctantly. She throws one last look back, before she places her attention in front of her.

Madoka discards her empty carton, and they make their way through the empty hallways.

Homura glances over. "Miki Sayaka... she is... how is she?"

Madoka keeps her eyes straight ahead. "Sayaka-chan... I'm not sure. I..." she shakes her head. "S-She told me to leave her alone..."

Homura concentrates on her magic, expending it outwards, searching for those familiar signatures that should be within her range.

Mami is there, still on the roof as the bell has yet to ring.

And Sayaka... is moving.

"She is leaving the school," Homura tells her. "Madoka, you go on ahead. I will bring her back."

Madoka grabs her arm before she can leave. "You... you can't, Homura-chan..."

"It shouldn't be hard to catch up to her. I will use my magic and—"

"No!"

"Madoka...?"

Madoka grips her arm tighter. "Y-You can't. What if... What if Sayaka-chan hurts you again...?"

Homura blinks. "...I will be fine. I—"

Madoka shakes her head; she can still remember the sight of Homura coughing up blood. "You're... you're still healing."

"I need to move, before Miki Sayaka is out of my range, Madoka."

"...You said so yourself, that... that Kyouko-chan and Sayaka-chan always seem to find each other."

"There is no guarantee that will happen. Sakura Kyouko is unpredictable. Madoka, please let go."

"No!"

Homura tries to shake her hand off. "She may need a grief seed, Madoka. Miki Sayaka —"

"S-Sayaka-chan will be fine. She... showed me her soul gem, before I left. She's... she's strong. Sayaka-chan will be okay."

Homura frowns at her words. "She is... more fragile than you think she is. Don't worry, her magic will not work on me again. I—"

Madoka throws her arms around her, tears in her eyes. "W-Why does everyone keep trying to push me away...? I-Is it because I'm not a magical girl? W-Will you listen to me if I make a wish, Homura-chan?"

"Mado—"

Homura stiffens just as the bell rings. Lunch is now over.

She takes one look at the tearful Madoka, and acts quickly.

When time clicks back into place, the hallway is empty, and the chime continues uninterrupted.

/

A part of her, knows she shouldn't have left school.

If she's caught, she'll get into even more trouble with her parents, and that's definitely not something she wants to happen.

But, she needs something else surrounding her—something other than the faces of Kyousuke, and Hitomi bearing down at her. What she needs is peace, so that she can finally make a decision.

She's wary as she walks around, careful of any truancy officers that may spot her. What she finds though, is that for the most part, she's unnoticed by other people.

Because—and she realizes this now, whether she's just a regular girl, or a magical girl, the rest of the world doesn't really care who she is. She could have saved that woman from a Witch, or that man from a familiar, but they wouldn't know.

And they wouldn't care.

She wanders, but not aimlessly.

A cafe. A burger joint.

Ramen shop. Taiyaki stand.

Crepe cart. Super market.

Convenience store.

Finally, she stops lying to herself. She knows who she's looking for.

She remembers something, and heads downtown.

The sole worker on shift gives her a suspicious look, but when she sees he makes no move to report her, she steps further inside.

The lights are dimmed, making the glowing screens brighter and the noises louder. She hears it, indistinguishable music and the pounding from the deep bass.

Here, she's finally close enough that she can easily pick out that red signature.

The music becomes louder, and when she spots that familiar figure twisting around, red hair swaying with her movements, she merely stands there, watching her for a moment.

Her eyes are drawn to her arm—that same arm she had destroyed yesterday. She glances down to her hands, to the image of crimson superimposed on her skin.

She suddenly feels the need to step closer, to make sure that what she's seeing is no hallucination. That the Kyouko there, in front of her, is not a figment of her imagination.

That she's really alive.

She stands behind her, watching her dancing that perfectly matches the beat.

There's a flourished pose when the song ends, before the music fades away.

She hears a crunch, as a pocky stick is snapped between teeth, and finally, Kyouko is turning around.

"Yo." Her hand holds out a familiar red box.

It's reflex now that has Sayaka reaching. Halfway, her hand stops.

The box shakes, and she looks up to see Kyouko with one eyebrow quirked.

With trembling fingers, she manages to pull out one stick. She doesn't know why, and she doesn't understand it, but when that familiar taste hits her tongue, the tension she feels slowly starts melting away.

Kyouko is grinning at her, and Sayaka finds it's easier to breathe. Easier to forget about Kyousuke and Hitomi.

"Yo," she finally replies.

/

They're still on school grounds, Madoka following Homura as she leads her to somewhere. They walk past the field, towards the walls that borders the edge of campus.

They squeeze between a sizable crack that's hidden by overgrown vines, and suddenly, they're beyond what Madoka recognizes.

She glances around; she remembers from first year, during their orientation, someone had mentioned how there was an empty lot behind the school.

It turns out, that the empty lot is not quite so empty. There's a building here, hidden and tucked away.

It's a dilapidated structure, made of wood with peeling paint, broken roof tiles, and warped boards. There are more vines here, covering the walls and haphazardly clinging to the surface; the sheer amount growing speaks of years of neglect and abandonment.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka moves closer as a chill runs down her back. "W-What is this place? Where are we going...?"

Homura remains quiet, and continues inside.

They climb over a scattered shelf on the floor, stepping into a dark hallway that's semi-lit with small rays of sunlight streaming through broken windows. Homura easily navigates them through more obstacles littered around, their footsteps echoing as she leads Madoka further back.

"This was built when the city was first established," Homura explains finally, voice quiet yet loud as it bounces off the wooden walls. She gestures to the ruined rooms they're passing by. "Temporary classrooms, as they finished construction for the rest of the school. It was supposed to be demolished, afterwards, but it didn't happen. Watch your step—some of the floorboards are rotten due to water damage."

Madoka nervously looks down, concentrating on her feet as she follows.

"H-How did you find this place?" Madoka asks softly.

"...There's a false barrier nearby. It's why this place is still here."

Madoka stiffens, hand gripping Homura's tighter.

"It's alright," Homura murmurs. "We're not going that far."

A sigh of relief, and Madoka continues to walk with Homura as they make their way through the hallway.

Finally, Homura stops.

Madoka notices it, that this is the only room so far with a door still intact; there's a small placard on top, labeled 1-F.

It's slid open, and Madoka blinks with what she finds inside.

There's grass growing through the cracks of the floorboards, and a stack of desks pushed to the far left. To the right, there's a green board, speckled with dust.

Unlike the rest of the building, it's bright due to the broken walls and the ceiling that's half gone. The flowers in the middle, reminds Madoka of a small garden.

Homura continues in, Madoka following her.

"They've finally bloomed..."

The familiarity in Homura's voice has Madoka looking at her. "What is this place, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances over to the green board, and Madoka turns in curiosity. There's nothing really distinguishable on it.

Homura doesn't reply, and merely walks over to the flowers. Madoka is still holding her arm, still trailing behind her.

"I found this place accidentally," Homura tells her. "This room in particularly, sits right at the borderline of the false barrier. It's not enough to affect us, but being inside here will make it nearly impossible for anyone to find us through magical tracking."

Madoka knows there's a lot left unsaid in Homura's words.

She watches as Homura takes a seat, and mimics her actions.

"Homura-chan...?"

Homura faces her. "Madoka. Have you calmed down?"

Madoka bows her head. The emotions she has been holding in, suddenly flow out. "...I'm sorry. I-It's just—" tears appear, and she blinks them away. "E-Everyone keeps telling me they're fine. A-And, I just—I just feel so useless. I c-can't help Sayaka-chan. I can't

help you. I c-can't help anyone. I'm not a magical girl," she hiccups, "I-I don't know what any of you are really going through. I—"

Homura grabs her and hugs her tightly. "You're not useless," she whispers. "You're—you're strong, stronger than you think you are. You don't need to become a magical girl just because you want to understand."

"But—"

Homura moves, and Madoka suddenly finds herself lying on the floor, Homura curled around her.

"Madoka, look up," Homura says softly.

Madoka turns her head, and the bright sunlight filtering in makes her eyes close momentarily.

She opens them, blinking, and the blue sky up above greets her. "Homura-chan...?"

"...Madoka, you asked me, what colour I see when I look up at the sky." Homura's voice is a gentle whisper against her ear. "I... For the longest time, I stopped noticing it. The sky... those flowers. Everything, all around us."

Madoka looks over to Homura, and the sight of her black hair spilled around her makes her appear even more ethereal. "Homura-chan...?"

"Tomoe Mami. Sakura Kyouko. Miki Sayaka. Myself. We... we can only see things now, through the eyes of a magical girl. What good would it do, if you are there, drowning with us...?" Homura presses her face into Madoka's neck. "I understand, how hard it is for you to stand on the sidelines."

"Homura-chan...?"

"But you can't," there's wetness against her neck from Homura's tears, "you can't follow after us, Madoka. Think of your family. Think of your Mama, your Papa. Takkun. The sky is still blue for you, Madoka."

Madoka can feel her own eyes burning as she struggles to hold back her own tears. Her arms wrap around Homura's thin shoulders, and she pulls her closer.

She closes her eyes, and despite her best efforts, her tears join Homura's as they trickle down.

\

There's a perfectly good bentou sitting in her bag, but that, is still at school.

Instead, there's a burger in her hands, and the feel of steel against her back.

She hears paper crumbling, and when she glances over, she's not surprised to see that Kyouko is already finished with her food.

Despite how she feels like she should have no appetite, she takes another bite before Kyouko can ask her if she can have hers.

There's the hollow sound as Kyouko finishes her drink. Seconds later, she watches as the cup disappears into the trashcan nearby.

"So," Kyouko finally says, turning to her. "What are you gonna do?"

She lowers her eyes. "Dunno..."

Kyouko yawns. "You wanna know what I think?"

Sayaka sighs. "No, but you're going to tell me anyways, right?"

"Yup." Kyouko nods. "Anyways, okay, so, say you confess to Pretty Boy, and... best case scenario: he likes you."

Sayaka can't deny how her heart speeds up. "Yeah..."

"...What happens then?" Kyouko asks. "You two gonna start dating?"

Sayaka looks away.

"So... you two date, and whatever, right? But, it still means that when he turns 18 he'll suddenly run off and marry Seaweed girl?"

Sayaka suddenly laughs. "...Madoka was right."

"What?"

Sayaka sighs. "...I should give up on Kyousuke."

Kyouko eyes her. "You think you can handle that?"

"...How long do magical girls live for, Kyouko?"

Kyouko blinks. "Uh, I'm not sure..."

"A few years?" Sayaka closes her eyes. "It doesn't matter even if Kyousuke likes me. Will we even live to become 18...?"

"H-Hey—"

Sayaka places her arm across her eyes. "I get it. I really, really, get it now. It doesn't matter if I like Kyousuke, or if he likes me back." Another laugh. "The moment I made my wish, I pretty much erased whatever chances I had with having a future with him. It was either me, or him. But never the both of us, together..."

"Hey!" Kyouko grabs her roughly by the shoulders. "Listen, alright? We live for however long we want to live for! The moment you start thinking about giving up, that's when things start going bad! Show me your soul gem!"

Sayaka shrugs her off. "I'm fine."

Kyouko's glare has her holding out her hand.

And to her surprise, the gem summoned is still a nice shade of blue.

"I understand everything now," Sayaka says softly, ring returning to her finger. "It doesn't matter what we do, because we will eventually die. Whether it's tomorrow, or next year... We'll get careless one day, or there will be a strong Witch we can't defeat. And we'll disappear, just like all those other girls. We'll—"

Sayaka suddenly finds her cheek stinging.

"With you, it's like, you take one step forward, and then ten steps back." Kyouko shakes her roughly. "How many times do I gotta hit you to get things through your thick skull? Why won't you get it?"

Sayaka slowly turns to face her.

"It sucks, you know, being alone. I get that. I know it, more than anyone! So why," Kyouko bows her head, "why can't you just see that you're not alone anymore? Forget about Pretty Boy, and Seaweed Girl, alright? You h-have... other people in your life too..."

Sayaka stares, unable to form proper words.

"Sayaka." Kyouko finally lifts her head. "Why, why won't you look at me...? I'm—I'm right here, you idiot. I'm right here."

/

She finds herself standing amongst rubble and stone slabs. A broken foundation to a destroyed building, steel rebar jutting out and broken glass scattered around her feet.

The sky above is gray, clouds churning overhead as droplets of rain fall. Water is hitting her face as the wind whips her messy hair around.

Homura is there, fighting.

All alone.

She's but a small speck in the sky as she faces a large, clock-like object towering over her.

The gears are turning, and suddenly everything is awash in red as fire spins and lights the sky.

It fills her vision, and she searches for that familiar figure when the smoke clears.

But—Homura—

Homura is nowhere to be found.

"Homura-chan!"

She wakes with a gasp, eyes full of fear, hands clinging onto warmth almost desperately.

"Homura-chan...?" she whispers as something painfully claws at heart.

There's a blanket of black tresses tangled in her fingers, and suddenly, she finds lavender peering at her.

"Madoka? Are you alright?" Homura's voice is soft. So familiar.

Madoka buries her face in Homura's neck. "Homura-chan..."

Hands on her back, Homura nuzzles her cheek against Madoka's head. "It's okay, Madoka. I'm here. Are you alright? D-Did you have another nightmare?"

Madoka holds her tighter. "I-I dreamt... I dreamt you were fighting," she whispers. "All alone, against this... this huge, W-Witch. S-She did something, with fire... a-and, suddenly you were gone..."

Homura ignores how her pulse quickens. "...I'm right here, Madoka. I-I'm not fighting anything..."

Madoka lets Homura hold her for a moment longer, before she finally pulls away. "Homura-chan...?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"... Have... Have... I met you before...?"

She feels Homura stiffen.

"Madoka...?"

Hands are suddenly against Homura's cheeks, light and gentle. "Homura-chan... are... are you hiding something from me...?"

Homura draws in a sharp intake of breath, and it's only because Madoka is still holding her that she remains in place.

"M-Madoka...?"

Madoka stares, and Homura finds she can't break her gaze. "Homura-chan... w-who are you...? Why... why does it feel like... I know you... from... so long ago..."

Homura suddenly tries to pull away, but Madoka latches onto her.

"Please," Madoka pleads, "please don't run away, Homura-chan."

"I-I—" Homura swallows hard, and closes her eyes. "I—"

They both jump when a small beep echoes in the room.

Madoka recognizes it as her message tone, but ignores it as she continues to stare at Homura.

She notices those ears are out now, flat against her head.

Another beep interrupts her thoughts, and Homura flinches at the sharp sound.

It's enough though, that Madoka frees one of her arms and reaches for her phone.

A message, from Hitomi.

A quick reply sent, before she's turning back to Homura, who now has her eyes cast everywhere but to her.

"Homura-chan...?"

Black ears twitch, and lavender flickers over. She can see the fear in them.

"Is it... something you can't tell me?" Madoka asks softly.

Homura hesitates. She slowly shakes her head.

Madoka blinks. "It's... something you can tell me?"

Another shake of her head.

Her brow furrows. "So you can tell me, but... you can't tell me?"

A nod this time.

Madoka can't help but give her an exasperated sigh. "Homura-chan..." She thinks briefly. "Is... is it something, you can tell me, but, just not yet...?"

Another hesitant nod.

"Alright... I'll... I'll wait."

Homura finally lifts her head to look at her.

"I'll wait," Madoka tells her. "Until you're ready."

Homura doesn't like that expression on Madoka's face, and it hurts her even more to know that she's the reason it's there. Just as she's about to open her mouth, another beep interrupts, and she jumps at the sound.

"Sorry," Madoka murmurs. She quickly digs out her phone from her skirt pocket once more. "It's from Hitomi-chan."

This time she sets her phone to silent, before she tucks it away again.

"...The next class is going to start soon," Madoka says. "Maybe... we should head back?"

Right on cue, Homura's stomach growls. She ducks her head, ears twitching in embarrassment.

It's enough to break the tension.

"Ehehe," Madoka laughs softly. "Guess the milk wasn't enough..." Madoka turns, and looks around.

They're secluded here, a small oasis nestled in between broken wood, overgrown grass, and blooming flowers.

"...Homura-chan?" She moves her head, smiling when she sees Homura looking at her. "...Mm, never mind. I'll tell you later, too."

Homura blinks. "Madoka...?"

Madoka slowly sits up, and starts dusting off her clothes. "We should head to class..." Her hands pause. "But... what do we tell the teacher?"

Homura joins her, ignoring the dust sticking to her uniform and instead fixes her hair. "I wasn't feeling too well after lunch, and you were accompanying me until I felt better."

Madoka glances over. "Shouldn't we have gone to the nurse though?"

"I am taller than you, Madoka. They can't expect you to be able to carry my weight. It will be fine."

Madoka watches as those familiar ears and tail disappears.

"Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

Madoka places one hand on the side of Homura's face.

"Madoka...?"

Her eyes widen as Madoka leans in close. There's a light touch, as her lips are pressed to her cheek.

Madoka blushes, pulling back as she withdraws her hand. She averts her eyes. "W-We should get to class..."

Homura remains frozen in place, and it isn't only until Madoka's grabs her hand, that she finally move**s.**

AN: Had some troubles with some scenes. Took a while. Can you believe it's almost summer...? Started this in jan, and now it's june. Crazy. Soon, I'll have enough stories under my belt, and then I'll leave foreeveeer.

As always, thanks for reading / reviewing! As for the things people pointed out, mostly about Junko, that will be addressed soon. And, there's a reason why Homura and Madoka are still sharing a bed, despite how welcoming Junko is. Logic? Ha! Who needs logic... Oh, and glad no one thought that Hitomi's sudden back story was too out there. Whew. Also, yes, Madoka knows that Sayaka made a wish to heal Kyousuke; she was just pointing out why the other people were so surprised at Kyousuke's sudden amazing recovery.

Will Homura eat a rat (or a bird)? Probably not...? Madoka told her not to, and she's trying her best to resist those delicious, fluffy animals. But—

Uhm... Yeah, I think that's a majority of the things I need to answer. Until next time...

Chapter 21: reasons

Standing off to the side, Homura is fidgeting with her school bag. They're right by the front gates, and she's staring across the street as Madoka explains Sayaka's situation to Mami.

Mami sighs softly. "What awful timing. You two should have contacted me."

Madoka shakes her head. "Sayaka-chan... probably wouldn't have listened to you either, Mami-chan."

"Still..."

Homura tunes back into the conversation when she realizes that Madoka is done. "Perhaps we should search for her. Enough time has passed that hopefully she has cooled down."

They both turn to her. Madoka automatically reaches for Homura's hand, but at the last moment, Homura steps back, suddenly looking nervous.

Madoka stares at her in confusion. Her hand drops to her side as she frowns. "W-We're supposed to go home after school, Homura-chan."

Mami nods. "Yes, you two should head on home. I will search for her."

"It will be easier with the two of us searching," Homura replies. "If she's still unstable, it may take the both of us to subdue her." She looks to Madoka. "You can head home first, Madoka. I will—"

Madoka narrows her eyes. "You will what, Homura-chan?"

Her expression has Homura cowering slightly. "U-Uhm..."

Madoka sighs. "You're still healing, Homura-chan."

"Mado—"

"Homura-chan."

Mami holds one hand up, trying to calm the both of them down. "Akemi-chan, really, I believe it will be alright. I will be able to handle myself against Sayaka. You and Madoka-chan should head home before you two get in trouble."

Homura's mouth opens to protest, but she sees Madoka reaching for her hand again and quickly moves away. She doesn't notice how Madoka's face falls as she turns to Mami.

"V-Very well. But you should at least find Sakura Kyouko first, just in case. If you're lucky, the two of them may be together."

Mami glances over to Madoka, before she nods. "Yes, of course."

Madoka holds her rejected hand to her chest, eyes staring at the ground. "L-Let's go home Homura-chan." She raises her eyes and gives Mami a smile that looks more like a grimace. "Thank you, Mami-chan, and sorry, for not being able to join you."

Mami shakes her head. "No need to apologize, Madoka-chan. I understand." She smiles. "I will contact you when I find her."

"If there is any trouble, do not hesitate to say so," Homura tells her.

Mami leans towards Homura, still smiling. She keeps her voice low. "Whatever you did, Akemi-chan, fix it." She steps back as Homura blinks in confusion. "I will see you two tomorrow."

Madoka nods. "Bye, Mami-chan. T-Thank you again."

They part ways, Madoka visibly sullen as a confused Homura trails after. Mami watches them for a moment, before she sighs, and heads in the opposite direction.

/

When they finally reach the halfway point at the familiar park, Madoka stops walking. She checks their surroundings, noting that the park isn't as crowded today, and making sure that there isn't anyone close enough to eavesdrop. She takes in a calming breath, before releasing it with a slow exhale. She sets her jaw, and turns around.

The sight of Homura standing further away than usual does little to ease her fears.

"...Madoka?"

Madoka moves to step closer, and Homura quickly steps back.

She catches the hurt expression on Madoka's face however, and blinks.

Madoka stares at the floor. "Homura-chan... d-do you hate me now?" she asks, voice suddenly small. "Because... because I kissed you...? D-Did you hate it...?"

"Madoka...?"

Madoka swipes at her eyes with her sleeve, lips trembling as she tries to hold back tears.

Homura feels herself panicking. "W-Wait, why are you crying, Madoka...? I don't—I don't hate you. I-I could never hate you..."

Madoka doesn't reply.

Homura hesitantly clears their distance. It takes her a few attempts until she manages to place her hands on Madoka's shoulders.

"I... d-didn't hate it," she tells her. "It was—it was...It was—I d-didn't hate it..." she whispers, face now flushed.

Madoka finally looks up. "Really...?" she sniffles loudly.

Homura nods. "Y-Yes..."

Madoka searches Homura's face, noticing how red her cheeks are. "Then, why do you keep moving away...?"

"T-The..." Homura bows her head, hands moving to cover her cat ears that suddenly pop out.

Madoka's eyes widen. "H-Homura-chan!"

Thinking quickly, she grabs Homura and pulls her close.

"M-Madoka?!"

Madoka loops her arms around Homura's waist, using her school bag to cover her tail.

"P-Put them away, Homura-chan!" Madoka hisses, face now completely red.

A whine from Homura. As Madoka starts growing light headed from the rush of blood, she feels Homura lift her arm. Something metal presses against her, and then there's the sound of a familiar click.

Still holding on, Madoka pulls back. The scenery is a washed out grey.

"I-Is it a Witch...?"

Homura is suddenly leaning heavily against her, breaths coming out in small gasps.

"Homura-chan?"

Madoka is unable to support her full weight, and barely manages to lower Homura to the ground before her legs can buckle under her.

"Homura-chan? What's wrong?" Madoka places her hands on Homura's face, noticing immediately how clammy her skin feels. She tilts her head up, and finds Homura complexion sickly pale.

Homura's cat ears are flat against her head. "S-Sor—" Her apology is cut off with a cough.

She holds up a trembling hand, summoning her soul gem into her palm.

Madoka watches as she brings it towards her chest—telling her exactly what had happened.

A tense moment, until Homura is finally breathing easier. Her ears flicker lightly, before she shakes her head.

As she returns the ring to her finger, she's already pulling Madoka to her feet.

"Homura-chan—"

"Need to restore time soon," she mumbles as she drags Madoka with her.

Madoka quietly follows, and they don't stop until they reach an empty section of the park.

Homura lets go of Madoka and a second later, time resumes. She hides her ears and tail right after she tucks her buckler away. Once that's done, she nervously turns, and finds Madoka staring at her, silently demanding an explanation. Lavender shifts around.

Before she can say anything though, Madoka lifts her hand. Her movements are tentative, but when Homura doesn't pull back, Madoka finally places a trembling hand to her cheek.

There's lots of things Madoka wants to say, but instead she exhales slowly, trying to keep from blowing up. Yelling and scolding Homura won't help.

"...Are you okay?"

Homura nods, keeping her gaze on the ground.

Madoka re-evaluates her appearance. She did at least seem healthier now. Still pale, but closer to her normal shade.

Her fingers brush against Homura's face. "Then, your ears earlier, was it a Witch?"

Homura shakes her head.

Madoka breathes out a sigh of relief. She relaxes ever so slightly.

"Then... what was that about...?"

Homura refuses to meet her eyes, and Madoka frowns.

Homura had panicked when she had confronted her.

Madoka feels her stomach drop as she lowers her hand. "...So you do hate me then."

"No! N-No..." Homura shakes her head.

"Then why do you keep moving away when I try to hold your hand...?"

"...I-I don't know," Homura mumbles. "Just..." She gestures helplessly. "I-It... t-the..." she ducks her head, her eyes darting to Madoka's, before she quickly averts them once more.

Madoka stares at her for a moment.

The only thing that had changed between them was what happened this afternoon. So many things could've been the catalyst, but Madoka has a feeling the kiss on the cheek has to be the reason.

If Homura didn't hate it, then...

Maybe...

"...W-We should head home now, Homura-chan."

Homura nods, glad that Madoka is dropping the subject. "Y-Yes..."

"Homura-chan...?"

"Y-Yes, Madoka?"

Madoka looks at her shyly. "If... If I kissed you again, would you mind...?"

The thought makes Homura dizzy. "U-Uhm, t-that... the..." Her eyes cast to the floor as she swallows heavily. Her ears threaten to appear and she forces them down. "...N-No," she manages to squeak out, thoroughly embarrassed. "N-Not if it's from you..."

Madoka feels her own cheeks turning red. "W-We should head home, Homura-chan..." she repeats once more.

"Y-Yes..."

Now relieved that Homura doesn't hate her, Madoka reaches for Homura's hand again, this time watching her reaction.

She sees her stiffen, but thankfully not move away. More importantly, that blush on her face tells Madoka everything she wants to know.

Slowly, Madoka links their fingers together. "Homura-chan?"

Homura merely stares at their joined hands. She's trying her best to calm her heartbeat and prevent another panic attack. Madoka remains quiet, almost as if she knows what Homura is thinking.

It takes a long moment until the tenseness fades, and all that's left is the familiar feeling of Madoka's hand in her own.

Finally, Homura looks up to see Madoka watching her.

"...You should take care of yourself better," Madoka tells her with a sad smile.

Homura guiltily glances away. "I'm okay," she mumbles.

Madoka trails her thumb over Homura's fingers, feeling her tense slightly, before once more relaxing. "You're always looking out for me, making sure that I'm okay. But," she blinks back sudden tears, "it hurts me too, to see you neglecting yourself. Leave things to Mami-chan, and Kyouko-chan, okay? They can handle things while you rest."

Homura turns to her in protest—but stops when she finds Madoka staring again.

She's not sure what she sees in those pink eyes. The usual warmth and kindness is there, as always, but there's something else.

Something that makes her stomach churn, and her heart race.

She clamps down on those feelings, because Madoka is still waiting for an answer.

"I'll... I'll try," she tells her.

Madoka knows it's the best she can ask for, and nods.

Homura hesitantly grips her hand tighter. "L-Let's go...let's go home, Madoka."

Madoka squeezes her hand in response. "Okay, Homura-chan."

She closes her eyes briefly.

Just another bump and hurdle to jump over.

"M-Madoka...?"

Her eyes open, and she gives Homura a smile. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

\

As she continues through the city, Mami finds herself growing increasingly frustrated at her inability to pinpoint where Kyouko, or even where Sayaka is.

Her years of experience doesn't seem to amount to much if she were to compare her abilities with Homura.

At least with magical tracking.

There's a large memo in her mind, reminding her to purchase a phone for Kyouko as she searches areas she knows the redhead frequents.

Which, unfortunately, is anywhere that has food.

She has already searched the mall, and though the arcade held traces of magic in the air, following those had lead to dead ends.

Another sigh, and she heads down a random street.

Halfway past, she catches another trail.

With a frown on her lips, and eyes determined, she decides she's tired of wandering aimlessly. Her footsteps stop, leaving her to stand in the middle of the sidewalk. She ignores everything around her as she expands her magic outwards, wrapping it around red that she knows so well.

She follows it down the street, turning a left at the corner. It continues, and she strains, trying to grasp at it desperately; she can feel lingering thoughts from a false barrier interfering with her magic.

Stubbornly, she clings to it, and her feet start moving.

Past that barrier, and that red trail suddenly branches into two: blue, signifying Sayaka.

She smiles to herself.

With a nod, she chases after those signatures.

/

"Just leave the dishes in the sink, Homura-chan," Tomohisa tells her with a kind smile. "I will wash them later."

Homura glances at him nervously. "O-Okay," she mumbles as she does as told.

Another nervous glance, before she tries to move out of the kitchen without running away.

Madoka is in the living room playing with Takkun, but half her attention is still on Homura. Watching the way she interacts with her dad only serves to reinforce her earlier musings. Not to mention Homura's social awkwardness is rather adorable.

And heartbreaking.

"Maroka!"

She turns just as something small crashes into her.

She falls to the floor, Takkun landing on top of her stomach with a giggle.

"Owww Takkun! That's not how you're supposed to get my attention!" Madoka scolds him.

He pouts, and suddenly her hands reach up to tickle him.

He giggles louder, and scrambles off.

"Come back here, Takkun!" She quickly rushes to her feet and gives chase.

Homura is entering the living room when Takkun darts her way.

"Protect me, Kitty!" he yells as he hides behind her.

Homura jumps, startled. "T-Takkun?"

Footsteps, and suddenly Madoka is in front of her, a devious smile on her lips.

It makes Homura nervous. "M-Madoka?"

Madoka appears thoughtful. "Hmmm. Does this mean you'll take his place, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances to Takkun who's still behind her, before turning back to Madoka in confusion. "W-What?"

"Takkun!" Madoka points at him. "Don't let Homura-chan go, okay!"

To Homura's surprise, Takkun wraps his arms around her legs. "Okay!"

"M-Madoka?"

Madoka grins. "Takkun's a turncoat, Homura-chan!"

"Mado—" Homura cuts herself off as she tries to dodge Madoka's attack.

Tomohisa smiles to himself, listening as laughter echoes in the house.

Two he recognizes, and one he's glad to hear.

\\

She's reaching the end of the trail, no longer having to concentrate as two bright beacons of red and blue glow just a bit away.

They're further from downtown, and she has already passed by an elementary school.

As she continues walking, she's struggling to remain composed.

There's a mother and child in front of her, and though she knows it's her mind playing tricks, the child is suddenly blonde with golden tresses that match the woman's as they walk, hand in hand.

Her footsteps are slower now, hesitant.

She can hear giggles, the yelling of high pitched voices.

One hand grips the other, trying to make the shaking stop.

She doesn't want to move closer, but those signatures are here, and maybe something akin to hope has her turning.

A small playground greets her, and her eyes are drawn to a three seated swing set.

"Okaa-san! Can I go on the swings? Please?"

She takes in a shaky breath.

"Alright, but just for a bit. We need to go to the market to buy groceries for dinner."

"'Kayyy!"

She forces her eyes away, instead concentrating on finding the reasons she had stepped into these haunted grounds in the first place.

She blinks when she spots Kyouko at the top of the house shaped slide. She's shouting, and waving her fist at a small gathering of younger children that are screaming at her from below.

A trace of blue, and she finds Sayaka inside the sandbox by the jungle gym, piling sand on top of sand, as two other children help her.

They're laughing, and they look completely okay.

Something twists inside her chest.

She's... not needed here.

Her feet drag as she starts making her way back home.

Suddenly, there's a tug on her jacket.

"Onee-chan!"

Mami turns, only to find a little girl, pulling her back.

"Onee-chan! Come play!"

She quickly wipes her eyes dry, and gives her a polite smile. "I'm sorry, Onee-chan is a bit busy at the moment."

"But, you're her friend, right, Onee-chan? You're wearing the same clothes!" She points to the sandbox, and Mami can't help but follow her gesture.

Only to find Sayaka waving her over.

"See! She's waving! Come on, Onee-chan! You can help us catch Fox Onee-chan!"

Mami blinks. "Fox...?"

"Yeah!" The little girl lets go only to use her index fingers to poke her incisors, inadvertently showing Mami the missing front tooth in her mouth. "She has pointy teeth! And she's red!"

Mami finds herself nodding in agreement. "That is... very true."

The little girl smiles, hands once again gripping Mami's jacket. "Come on, Onee-chan! Let's go!"

Still confused, Mami feels herself being dragged closer to the park.

"Ha! I see you brought reinforcements!" a familiar voice shouts.

Mami looks up to see Kyouko pointing at her direction. There's a smirk on her face.

"You think you'll defeat me? Bring it!"

Her words only serve to rile the children even further.

"Ah... sorry about that, Mami-san," Sayaka says, appearing next to her, hands dusting the sand from her clothes.

Mami eyes her critically. "You are... alright, Sayaka?"

"...Not yet," Sayaka replies, looking up with a sad smile. "But—" more shouting, and they both turn to Kyouko who's now being chased around. "—it's kind of hard to remain sad with that idiot distracting me."

Mami nods. "That's... good to hear. Everyone's worried about you."

"Ah." Sayaka laughs and scratches the back of her head. "Y-Yeah..."

"Onee-chan! Are you two done yet?" the little girl tugs on Mami's hand. "Let's go, let's go!" She looks at Sayaka. "Are you done resting, Onee-chan?"

Sayaka grins, and suddenly flexes her arm. "Yeah! I'm definitely going to get Kyouko this time!" She gives Mami a wink. "It'll definitely be easier with you helping us, Mami-san!"

Before Mami can reply, Sayaka grabs her other hand. "Let's go show Kyouko how outmatched she is!"

She takes off towards the swings, to where Kyouko is now running circles around the other kids.

Both hands occupied, Mami can only follow after.

It has been a while since she has stepped foot into this park.

But, it's not as bad she thought it would be.

/

She leans back against her hands, head tilted as she stretches out her neck. There's noises from the TV, interrupted every so often with giggles from Takkun as he watches his favourite show.

The kitchen is empty, and Madoka is in charge of the house while her dad is out doing errands. Babysitting Takkun is simple enough, and she's using the opportunity to get a head start on her homework. After receiving a text from Mami just a bit ago, she's finally able to concentrate.

Somewhat.

She glances over to the patio, and the sight of Homura curled around Amy brings a smile to her lips. In that particular spot right by the door, sunlight filters in continuously through the glass windows, and Homura had succumbed to the warmth shortly after Tomohisa had left.

There's a light blanket covering her, and as Madoka watches the slow rise and fall, the smile drops into a frown. A napping Homura is never a good thing, no matter how cute she looks.

A few more observed breaths, until Madoka shakes her head, and turns back to her homework.

Eying her book, she counts at least five more problems to solve. Another quick check over to Takkun who's still obediently watching TV, before she turns back to her task.

More calculations are mumbled, and she's in the midst of writing when something shakes her arm.

"Ahhh." There are uneven markings on her paper now, and she turns to Takkun, a scold ready on her lips. She stops when she notices he has tears in his eyes.

"Maroka, Maroka!"

She drops her pencil, looking at him in worry. "What's wrong, Takkun? Did you see something scary? Does your tummy hurt?"

He shakes his head, and points over to Homura.

"Kitty's crying, Maroka. S-She keeps calling for you," he tells her, sniffling. "She won't stop, even after I petted her."

"Eh?" Madoka quickly moves to check on Homura. Takkun trails after her, gripping the ends of her skirt tightly.

Amy is awake, headbutting Homura, trying to wake her.

It's not working. Madoka can tell that Homura is knee deep in the throe of a nightmare, blanket now tossed aside from her movements. She kneels besides her, reaching for her hand that's searching for something.

Homura's whispering her name, over and over, voice desperate and pleading.

"Homura-chan!" Madoka tries to shake her awake. "Homura-chan, wake up! Homura-chan!"

A gasp, and lavender finally opens, wide with tears prickling at the corners. Her ears are out, once more flat against her head.

"Homura-chan? Are you okay?"

Homura jolts away from her, but is unable to escape with Madoka still gripping her hand tightly.

There's fear in her eyes, and something so broken about her expression.

Madoka moves, arms wrapping around Homura, ignoring how she stiffens as she's engulfed into a hug.

"Homura-chan..."

"M-Madoka...?"

"It's okay, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her. "You were having another nightmare. It's okay..."

She's trembling in her arms, and Madoka holds her tighter.

"I-Is Kitty okay, Maroka?"

Madoka sniffles and pulls back to give Takkun a teary smile. "She's okay, Takkun. Right, Homura-chan?"

Homura nods, her hands moving to wipe her tears. "I-I'm okay, Takkun."

"Meow."

Homura turns, and Amy hops into her lap. "...S-Sorry for making everyone worried." She bows her head in embarrassment, ears twitching; a quick check around, and she's at least glad that Madoka's dad isn't here.

Takkun approaches them hesitantly. He suddenly leans to Madoka and tugs on her shirt.

"What is it, Takkun?"

He cups his hands in front of his mouth and whispers something in Madoka's ear.

He's still loud enough that Homura can hear him, but she doesn't quite understand what his words mean.

"I'm sure she'd like it very much," Madoka says as Takkun moves away.

He nods, and with a determined expression, he walks over to Homura.

Once he's close enough, he leans forward as Homura stares. She blinks when he kisses her on the forehead.

He brings up his hand, and rubs her head. "Mama does this for me when I have a bad dream," he tells her. "Mama says, bad dreams are bad thoughts, and this changes them into good ones."

Homura blinks once more.

He quickly turns to Madoka. "Maroka's turn!"

"Eh?" She stares at him in confusion.

He points to Homura's forehead. "It takes two kisses for it to work, Maroka! That's why Mama and Papa have to be there if I have a bad dream!"

Homura glances over at her, cheeks suddenly dusted with pink. "I-It's okay, Takkun. I already feel better..."

Takkun stomps his foot. "No! Maroka!"

Madoka holds out her hands. "C-Calm down, Takkun. I just have to kiss her forehead, right?"

He nods. "And rub her head, like this." His small hand continues petting Homura. "See? Now you, Maroka!" He steps back, staring at her expectantly.

"Okay, okay." Madoka turns to face Homura.

She hesitates, and looks to her brother who gives her another nod. She takes a deep breath.

Something about how they're in the living room, and not inside the privacy of her room, has her nervous.

It's nothing she hasn't done before, and it's nothing compared to earlier today, but nonetheless, her cheeks feel warm, and her heart is pounding.

"Maroka?"

"R-Right." Madoka wipes her palms on the front of her skirt.

She glances to Homura, and seeing her tail flicker about nervously makes her feel better.

She leans close, and like Takkun had done earlier, she presses a soft kiss onto Homura's forehead. She moves away, and mimicking Takkun, her hand reaches up to gently rub Homura's head.

"No more bad dreams for Homura-chan," she says softly.

Takkun's hand joins hers.

"No more bad dreams," he echoes.

"Meow."

Homura closes her eyes as she feels more tears gathering.

This time though, they're not because of her nightmares.

\

It's when she stops to catch her breath, that she finally notices it.

Her eyes cast to the floor, and she can see how wide the shadows are as they stretch across. How things suddenly seem dimmer, and how the park is quieter as half the kids are now gone.

She quickly digs through her pockets for her phone. When the current time blinks back, she sighs.

"What's wrong, Sayaka?" Mami has joined her, a little out of breath from running around.

Sayaka unlocks her screen, wincing when she realizes she has missed plenty of calls from her mother because her phone was still set on silent.

"I need to get home," she answers. A thought occurs, and she hangs her head. "My bag is still at school..."

"Ah..." Mami places a hand on her chin. "If I had known, I would've brought it with me."

"No, it's my own fault," Sayaka tells her. "I better go though."

Kyouko slides in right besides them, arms held up into the shape of a 'T'. "Time!" she yells out to the kids following after her.

They grumble, but they take the chance to rest as Kyouko turns.

"What's up?"

"I need to get home," Sayaka replies. "I also need to go back to school and grab my bag."

Kyouko nods, hands now clasped behind her head. "Yeah, I'm starting to get hungry anyways." She turns to Mami. "I ate all the leftovers from last night's dinner. You going to cook tonight, or should we just buy something to eat?"

Kyouko's words make Mami pause.

"Mami?"

"Ah." Something blooms in her heart—that's right, she's not really alone anymore. Mami smiles. "Well, I was thinking of making stew tonight."

"Sounds good." Kyouko yawns. "Let's get something to eat before we go home though."

"Nee-chan! Your time out is taking too long!"

They turn only to find the same group of kids staring at them.

Sayaka holds up her hand and gives them a smile. "Actually, sorry, this Onee-chan needs to go home."

"Ehhhh?" An echo of whines sound off.

Sayaka leans forward. "If I don't, my mom's going to get reeeeeally angry at me!"

"You're already in middle school, but you're still afraid of your mom?" one of them asks, voice incredulous.

Sayaka nods. "Of course! My mom is super scary." She holds out her fingers in front of her eyebrows, slanting them downwards. "When she's angry, her eyebrows go down, like this, and her voice is super loud. She also threatens to take away my sides from dinner, forcing me to eat plain rice!

Some gasps, and a bit of laughter all around.

Sayaka straightens up. "So I need to get home, before that happens."

"What about you, Onee-chan?"

Mami gives them a kind smile. "Sorry, it's getting late, and we need to get going as well."

"Ehhhhh?"

"Homework, and there are other things to do," she tells them firmly.

Kyouko nods. "Yea—"

Sayaka notices how she stiffens.

"Yeah," Kyouko continues, "we're busy people! Got better things to do than to mess around with you brats." Her voice is joking, and a few of them stick out their tongue at her.

Mami smiles wider, and waves. "We'll be going now."

She suddenly finds two hands wrapped around her arm. When she looks down in surprise, a teary face is pouting at her.

"Will you come back and play?" the same little girl that had dragged her to the park asks.

Mami nods. "Yes, of course."

The girl brightens, showing off that missing tooth with a smile. "Okay." She lets Mami go.

"What about you, Fox-nee-chan!" someone calls out.

Kyouko sticks out her tongue. "Maybe, if I feel like it." She turns and starts walking away, one arm waving behind her. "See you, brats."

A small bow, and Mami follows with Sayaka right next to her.

They wave once more to the few kids still watching, before they head down the street. Once they hit the corner, Sayaka turns to face them.

"Sayaka, you should head on home," Mami tells her before she can say anything.

"Nope." Sayaka shakes her head. "I'm already late, and, there's no way I'm going to run away."

Kyouko sighs. "Me and Mami'll handle it. Just go home already."

Sayaka curls her hands into fists. "No. We're all in this together. It's... It's time I started thinking about others. About anyone that isn't myself. We're a team here." She bows low. "I'm sorry, that it took me this long to realize this! Please, take me with you!"

Mami and Kyouko exchange a look. Kyouko shrugs as she glances away, finger scratching her cheek.

Mami feels a smile tugging on her lips. "Very well, Sayaka."

Sayaka straightens with a grin.

"But!" Mami holds up a finger. "Kyouko and I are still your senpai. If we tell you to do something, please follow our orders!"

Sayaka nods, throwing Mami a salute. "Yes, Sir!"

Kyouko cracks her knuckles. "Alright, enough of your sappy love story. Let's go kick some butt."

/

She's placing the finishing touches on her last problem, when a high pitched giggle breaks through her concentration.

She turns, and smiles at the sight of Takkun sitting in Homura's lap. They're watching TV, or at least Takkun is. Homura is pretending she isn't, struggling to keep her attention on the notebook in her hands.

Takkun giggles again at whatever is on the screen, and lavender looks over to see what has him laughing so much.

Madoka bites her lip, trying not to laugh. Homura really does have a low attention span when it comes to bright colours and flashy movements; the notebook is now ignored, and they're both watching the cartoon intently.

There's a sound from the kitchen, and Madoka turns to see her dad wipe his hands on a dish cloth before he reaches for the phone.

"Hello? Ah... Okay. Yes, they came home right after school. Yes... Yes, I will tell them... don't work too hard, alright? Okay... love you too. See you later tonight."

As soon as he hangs up, Madoka calls out to him. "Who was that, Papa?"

He looks to her with a smile. "It was Mama. She has to work late tonight, so she won't be home for dinner."

"Ahh, okay." Madoka turns back around.

It takes another minute until she's finally done. She shuts her workbook, leaving her pencil right on top.

She stands, and within a few strides and minimal movement, she's sitting right next to Homura.

Homura tilts her head in question.

"I finished everything by myself," Madoka tells her with a proud grin.

"Good work, Madoka," Homura replies.

"Thanks, Homura-chan. It's only because you've been tutoring me. I couldn't have done it without you!" She leans over, giving her a half hug. This earns her a blush that makes Madoka grin wider. "Takkun, after you watch this, do you want to play a video game?"

He pumps his fist, nearly knocking it into Homura's jaw if she hadn't moved in time.

"Yes! Let's play, let's play!" he cheers.

"Only for an hour," Tomohisa shouts from the kitchen. "We don't want you know what happening again!"

"Okaaaay," Madoka replies.

Homura blinks. "What will happen?"

Madoka gives her a sheepish smile. "Uhm..."

Takkun giggles. "Maroka gets mad!"

"It's because they cheat!" Madoka cries out in her defense.

Homura is eying her curiously, but Takkun tugs on her shirt. "Yes, Takkun?"

"You have to calm Maroka, okay? If she gets mad!"

"...How do I calm her down?"

He points to the TV. "Turn off!"

She gives Madoka another skeptical look.

"It'll be fine!" Madoka tells her with a nervous laugh. "Really!"

"...Alright."

\

Boots landing with a light clatter, Kyouko concentrates, twisting and wrapping her latticed barrier around the Witch right in front of her. "Sayaka!"

"Yeah!"

A string of swords already lined up, she hurls them at the Witch. One by one, they slice and cut the darkened tendrils threatening to break through.

A loud scream echoes in their ears, and Sayaka winces, hands brought up to temper the sound.

"Mami-san!"

"Yes!" Ribbons already wrapped around her arms, they extend and twirl in front of her, glowing bright yellow.

A flash of light, and her trademark canon gun is in front of her.

"Sayaka! Kyouko!" the shout the only warning before she starts charging her weapon.

Kyouko remains in place, holding the Witch captive with her magic. At the last second, right before she's about to move, she feels herself being lifted.

She turns her head, only to find blue against her: Sayaka is carrying her in her arms.

White cape fluttering behind her, Sayaka leaps away just as a 'Tiro Finale!' is heard.

She lands in a slight kneel as the surrounding area behind them glows brightly.

"You alright, Kyouko?" There's a grin on her lips.

Kyouko quickly kicks out her legs. "Let go of me, you idiot!"

She tumbles from her grasp, her struggling overbalancing Sayaka who ends up joining her on the floor.

"Ow! Hey!"

"Stupid!" Kyouko replies, trying to shove her away. "What the hell was that?!"

Sayaka winces as a fist connects with her cheek. "Ow! What was what? I saved you from getting blown to pieces, that's what!"

"Yeah, right! I could've moved away myself! Compared to Kitty Cat, you move like molasses!"

"What?!"

Too far into their arguing, they fail to hear the clicks of approaching high heels on cement.

"Ahem."

They both freeze.

"If you're done here, I believe Sayaka needs to go home...?" Mami asks them, eyebrow raised. She flashes yellow, and returns to her school uniform.

Kyouko manages one last hit as she shoves Sayaka to the ground, before she stands. "Yeah," she grunts out, dispelling her transformation.

Sayaka remains lying there, staring at the now orange tinged skies above. Something about it makes her laugh. She closes her eyes.

Mami and Kyouko peer at her from above when they notice she hasn't moved.

"Sayaka? Are you alright...?" Mami's worried voice has her eyes opening. "Do you need a grief seed?" She holds out the one recently acquired.

Sayaka gives her a smile. "No. I'm alright. I'll be alright..." Her eyes close again.

And even though Kyouko yells into her ear, and pulls her up from the ground none too gently, she's still smiling to herself.

/

The door shuts with a small click, and she can hear light murmurs from the TV in the living room.

She's removing her shoes, when a voice calls out through the hallway.

"Sayaka? Is that you?"

A soft sigh. She lines her shoes neatly at the entrance, before heading further into the apartment.

Her mother meets her in front of the kitchen, staring expectantly, hands on her hips.

"I'm back," Sayaka says, hand gripping the bag at her side tightly.

"... No cellphone, no TV, and the only time you will have access to your laptop is when you're working on your homework," her mother tells her.

Sayaka bobs her head up and down. "Okay."

"Add another week to your grounding as well."

"Okay."

Her mother eyes her. "...Welcome back. Go wash up, dinner is soon."

"Alright."

Sayaka moves to head to her room when her mother's voice stops her.

"Did you at least find what you were looking for?" she asks. "Three hours late, it must've been something important."

Sayaka turns around. To her mother's surprise, she gives her a real smile—something she hasn't seen lately.

"Yeah, it was really important. And I did. I found it."

"...Good. I'm glad, Sayaka. Now, go wash up."

Another nod. "Yeah, me too, mom. Thank**s."**

AN: wao, I didn't realize it's been a while since I updated this. Too busy, but also too distracted ;0

Let's see, I really want to catch up, and get the next chapter up in 2 weeks(?), which will be hard because still busy. How did it turn into July so quickly? ?_? Had lots of problems writing this...! The gist of what I want to happen has been written though.

Thank you everyone for reading/reviewing :)) New, and the usual suspects leaving reviews! It really helps to encourage me to write, even when I don't feel like it, which is always, trust me. You don't understand how many *ideas* I have, and how hard it is to transfer that into words. Blarghh.

Thanks again! :)) Until next time.

Chapter 22: family

Still warm from their bath, Homura is lying in bed, head in Madoka's lap as hands gently run through her hair.

Madoka smiles down at Homura who's obviously falling asleep; the purrs rumbling from her throat tell her how content she is.

Unconsciously, Homura turns over onto her back, eyes closed, hands bunched up to her side.

"Hmm?" Madoka freezes as she recognizes this; sometimes Amy does the same thing when she pets her.

She nervously looks around.

Her hands slowly move, and just as they hover over Homura's stomach, there's a knock on the door.

She jumps, jostling Homura out of her lap as Amy meows in protest from her bed.

"J-Just a moment!" Madoka calls out.

She quickly urges Homura to hide her tail and ears as she tries her best to dispel her own blush.

As soon as they're ready, she shouts out once more. "Come in!"

The door is pushed open, revealing her Papa who is cradling a sleepy looking Takkun in his arms.

"What's wrong, Papa?"

Tomohisa smiles, and gestures to Takkun in response. "Takkun wanted to say goodnight to Homura-chan."

Takkun's eyes are half closed. He reaches out, his small hands grasping at air. "Kittyyyyyyyy."

Now sitting on the bed next to Madoka, Homura tilts her head in confusion.

Tomohisa steps closer. "Kitty's right here, Takkun."

He mumbles something, hands still blinding reaching. Madoka elbows Homura.

"...What's wrong, Takkun?" she asks quietly.

His eyes finally open at the sound of her voice. "Kittyyyy." He leans forward, almost falling out of Tomohisa's arms if not for his dad's fast reflexes.

He's aiming to kiss her forehead, and completely misses, instead planting a sloppy kiss on her eyebrow. He moves his hand, and is at least more successful as he pats her head.

"Goodnight, Kittyyyyyy," he mumbles. "No more bad dreamssss." Tomohisa pulls him in, and holds him close to his shoulders. "Marokaaa."

Madoka is grinning widely. "Yes, Takkun?"

"Kiss Kitty, okay?"

Madoka flushes lightly, eyes moving to avoid looking at her dad. "Uhm..."

"Kiss! Kiss!" He repeats again, his words punctuated as he slaps Tomohisa's shoulder.

Madoka smiles nervously. "R-Right. Don't worry, Takkun. I-I'll..." she mutters something under her breath.

"Goooood," he replies, now holding onto his dad's shirt as his eyes shut close.

Tomohisa has a smile on his lips. "I'll send him to bed now. Sorry for disturbing you girls."

"U-Uh huh," Madoka says, still looking away.

He exits, shutting the door after him.

There's a few seconds of silence, until Madoka turns to Homura, who turns to her at the same time.

They quickly both turn away, faces lined with blushes.

"U-Uhm..." Madoka coughs into her hand. "...My position as older sister is in danger because of you, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks, turning back to face her.

Madoka pouts. "Takkun doesn't even say goodnight to me usually. And here he is, coming into my room, so that he can give you a goodnight kiss!"

Homura guiltily looks down. "I apologize, Madoka. I—"

Madoka sighs. She reaches forward, hands looping around Homura's waist, before she pulls her down to the bed.

"We really need to work on your humour, Homura-chan."

Another confused look.

Madoka smiles. "As in, you really have none, which makes it kind of hard to tease you sometimes."

"O-Oh..."

"Mm... You know, it's been a while since I've finished my homework this early. And I'm not even sleepy yet. How about you, Homura-chan? You were close to falling asleep earlier, before Papa and Takkun came in..."

Madoka's voice trails off as she fights down her blush; Homura most likely hadn't realized what had happened.

Homura nods, her calm face only confirming Madoka's thoughts. "Yes, but I am more or less awake now. The nap this afternoon helped."

Madoka hums. "...What do you usually do for fun, Homura-chan?"

She blinks. "Fun...?"

Madoka nods, closing her eyes. "Mmhmm. Like, when your homework is finished, and you're not out hunting witches."

She's waiting for her response, and when the silence lasts a little too long, she opens her eyes, only to find Homura deep in thought.

She reaches out, hand brushing against Homura's forehead.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks. "...I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Uhm. F-For fun... I don't... I don't really..."

Madoka frowns. If she thinks about it though, that seems to fit Homura to a tee.

She scoots closer, noticing how Homura stiffens when their faces are only a small distance apart.

"...M-Madoka...?"

Madoka ignores their close proximity, instead staring straight into lavender. "Homura-chan. You know... I still don't really know much about you."

"...?"

"Your hobbies... things like that." She smiles. "Let's get to know each other better, Homura-chan."

Homura's eyes shift around. "U-Uhm..." She nods, looking unsure. "O-Okay..."

Madoka grins. "Okay, I'll start first. Uhm... what kind of music do you like, Homura-chan?"

"U-Uhm... T-The..." Homura looks away, slightly panicking as she tries to remember something. "...C-Classical...?"

Madoka eyes her carefully. "...You can pass, if you want to, Homura-chan."

Homura turns back to face her. "Pass...?"

Madoka nods. "If you don't want to answer, you can just say 'Pass.'"

"O-Oh. Uhm. ...Pass...?"

"Okay. It's your turn to ask me a question now, Homura-chan."

"Uhm..." Homura looks around. "Uhm... W-What kind of music do you like, Madoka...?"

Madoka's not at all surprised at her question. In fact, she had expected it. "Mm. Pop... or, well, anything with a good beat, really. The kind of music that's really catchy as soon as you hear it."

Homura nods slowly, and Madoka already knows she has no idea what she's talking about.

"Okay, my turn, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

"Hmm. Can you swim, Homura-chan?"

She blinks. "Uhm... k-kind of." Her eyebrows furrow. "I think..." she murmurs to herself, but Madoka is close enough that she hears it.

Madoka nods, filing that tidbit away. "Your turn, Homura-chan."

"Uhm..." Homura glances to the side. "Can you swim, Madoka...?"

A soft sigh. "Yes, I took lessons when I was younger, with Sayaka-chan and Kamijou-kun." She gives a sheepish smile. "I had a bit of trouble passing the exam though, when they had us jump off the diving board... but I eventually mastered it!"

"T-That's good, Madoka."

"My turn, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

"Your favourite subject in school, and why."

Homura shifts. "U-Uhm... math. T-The formulas never change, and as long as you follow the steps, you'll always be lead to the correct answer..."

Madoka hums, noticing how wistful Homura looks as she says that. "Your turn, Homura-chan."

Lavender peers at her nervously. "...W-What's your favourite subject in school, Madoka...?"

Madoka tugs Homura closer, wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

"M-Madoka...?"

Madoka sighs. "Hm... Art. I like transferring my thoughts onto paper. It's relaxing, and it's a subject I'm actually good at."

Homura tries to move away, but Madoka is still holding her.

"My turn, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

Madoka smiles sadly. She already knows whatever she asks Homura will be repeated her way.

Homura really is socially awkward, and that confirmation merely has Madoka hugging her tighter.

"M-Madoka...?"

"I'm thinking, Homura-chan."

"...O-Okay."

/

She's still holding onto Homura, frowning as she goes over her answers in her head.

There's a lull in their questions, mostly because Homura is falling asleep once more. She can feel her breathing steadily against her, body now completely relaxed; a contrast to the ball of nerves she was just a bit ago.

Madoka closes her eyes.

Homura's social awkwardness is just the tip of the iceberg.

Half her questions were passed, and the more Madoka tried to learn about her, the less concise her responses became. There were enough pauses of silences, that Madoka is suspecting that there's something wrong Homura's memory.

She opens her eyes, and turns her head slightly, enough so that she can see that head of dark hair resting against her shoulder.

Her hand lifts, and she brings it down to stroke Homura's head.

"Homura-chan..."

A soft murmur in response, before she feels Homura nuzzle her cheek.

That sad smile reappears on her face.

How long will Homura be able to sleep, until her nightmares wake her once more?

She sighs.

Just as she's about to suggest to Homura that she sleep properly in bed, there's another knock on the door.

Homura whines softly, burying her face into Madoka's neck.

Madoka doesn't mind—but she feels her cheeks growing warm at the thought of her parents walking in to see this.

She pulls away, just as there's another knock.

"Madoka? Are you awake?"

Her eyes widen; she can just imagine the teasing, and she quickly pries Homura off her to sit up.

"Come in, Mama," she calls out.

Homura is next to her, rubbing her eyes when the door opens, revealing a Junko who's still dressed in her business suit.

"Ah, sorry, did I wake you?" she asks, glancing over to the clock. It's only a bit past 10.

Madoka looks to Homura. "Homura-chan was falling asleep."

"...I'm awake," she says, blinking sleepily.

Junko smiles in amusement, and enters the room.

"Welcome back, Mama. How was work?" Madoka asks.

"Ahh." Junko shakes her head. "As always, the directors never really know what they want. So there's more pressure on us to figure out what they want." She sighs. "The only good thing is they're catering our meals as we work through the deadline."

"Does that mean you'll have to work late this whole week, Mama?"

Junko nods. "Unfortunately, yes. All through the weekend as well, I'm afraid."

"Ahh." Madoka is sympathetic, but Junko is not here for that.

She glances over to Homura, who seems to be waking up.

Junko smiles again. "Actually, I brought home some desserts from the office today. Was wondering if you girls would like to join me and your Papa as we sample what my boss considers motivation for us to work harder. Apparently, it's from a very well known bakery."

Madoka blinks. "Sure, I don't mind, Mama."

Junko turns to Homura. "How 'bout you, Homura?"

She flinches at being addressed. "O-Okay..."

"Good, good. Actually, Homura," Junko pauses, waiting for Homura to look up, "why don't you head over to the kitchen first? I need to talk to Madoka about a few things, and then we'll join you."

They both give Junko confused looks, though Madoka's is more nervous than anything.

Homura glances over to Madoka, before looking back to Junko.

Another encouraging nod has her slowly standing to her feet.

Junko smiles as Homura gives her another nervous look. Madoka nods as well, and she reluctantly moves to leave the room.

One more glance, until finally, she's out the door.

There's a gentle click as it closes behind her, leaving Junko and Madoka alone.

Back straight, Madoka has her hands on her knees as she watches her mother look around.

Nervous, yet curious, Madoka follows that gaze as it surveys her room.

She sees her shelf lined with various plushies. The large number of chairs in her collection.

Pink wallpaper, and curtains drawn up against her window.

A soft sigh, and Madoka turns to see her mother smoothing down her skirt. She sees the ever confident businesswoman, Kaname Junko in front of her.

Those hard violet eyes lock with hers, and Madoka finds herself gulping nervously.

A small smile. "...You've grown, haven't you, Madoka?"

"Mama...?"

Junko sighs once more. "Alright. I'll cut right to the chase, Madoka. I know you have been lying to me."

Just like that, Madoka feels the temperature rise. Her heart is beating loudly and there's something close to panic that pulls at her stomach.

She opens her mouth—but her mother's hand stops any protests.

She swallows down her words.

"Now, before you say anything, hear what I have to say first, alright, Madoka?"

She nods.

"Alright, now..." Junko approaches her slowly, and Madoka finds it hard to look away, even though she really, really wants to. "There's a reason I let you continue to believe you had me fooled. And I know it's the same reason that you have been lying to me."

Madoka blinks.

Junko lifts her eyebrows. "A certain dark-haired girl that has taken this household by storm," she clarifies.

A silent 'oh' from Madoka's lips—before those pink eyes suddenly look away.

"Homura..." Junko shakes her head. "I do understand that at this moment, you're probably the only one she really trusts, Madoka."

Madoka glances up, only to find her mother walking over to her desk. She watches as she rolls the chair over, stopping once it's right in front of the bed.

Junko maneuvers around it, and takes a seat.

Madoka sits up straight. The bed is a bit higher than the chair, and she finds herself sitting eye to eye with her mother.

"Madoka," Junko says, staring at her, "I've raised you to be a good girl. Someone who doesn't lie. Who doesn't cheat."

"Ma—"

She holds out her hand. "Wait, okay, Madoka?"

Her eyes dart around, before she nods.

"...But I also know that you're growing up. You're getting older, and you're learning that the world isn't as black and white as it should be." Another smile. "I didn't think it would be so soon—that you would start moving away from me." A soft laugh. "I always thought it would happen closer to high school. Maybe even college, if I was lucky! But, you've been taking steps on your own, and as a mother, though I don't like seeing it, it's not my place to try and hold you back."

Madoka twists her hands in her lap, the guilt chewing her insides as she tries to calm down.

"But..." Junko sighs. "I want you to be honest with me here, Madoka."

A hesitant nod.

"This...whatever you and Homura are involved with... is it illegal?"

"N-No!"

"Are you two doing drugs?"

A vehement shake of her head. "No! Of course not!"

"Is it something that is hurting either of you?"

"A—" Madoka opens her mouth, but shuts it right after. In a way, Homura is hurting herself.

"...Alright, we'll get back to that," Junko tells her.

Madoka nods slowly.

"And... finally..." Junko narrows her eyes. "...Are you involved with boys somehow?"

Madoka blinks. "E-Eh?"

"...I have heard stories of girls your age, posing as call girls for extra spending money."

It takes a moment—until Madoka realizes what her mother is implying. Her face flushes red up to her ears, and she shakes her head.

"N-No! Of course not, Mama! I-I would never! A-And H-Homura-chan wouldn't either!"

Just her reaction has Junko laughing.

At least some things are still the same.

She waits until Madoka calms down before continuing.

"Good. That's good then." Her face softens. "Listen, Madoka," Madoka suddenly finds her mother's hand on top of hers, "you are my daughter. My baby girl, no matter what. I don't care that you lied to me, though maybe I'm a bit hurt, and disappointed that you're starting to keep secrets from me."

She stops Madoka from protesting.

"Secrets are fine, Madoka. We all have our own. But, if you're doing something that may hurt you, or hurt Homura, you need to tell me. I know you may think you're the only one that can help her. And maybe she made you promise not to say anything. But, this is not a burden you need to bear on your own, Madoka." She lifts her hand, fingers gently wiping the tears from Madoka's cheeks. "Your Papa and I, we're here to help you, Madoka. But we can't help you, if you don't say anything."

A quiver of her lips, and Junko moves out of her seat as Madoka starts crying.

Guilt, and her worry for Homura is wearing her down.

Junko wraps her arms around those small shoulders, holding her close. "Shhh, honey. Don't cry, alright? I'm not angry at you. If anything, I'm angry at Homura's parents, for abandoning their daughter. Making it so that she has to turn to you, for help, when they should be the ones providing her with security."

Whatever Madoka says in response is lost within her tearful babbles as she continues to cry. A fond smile across her lips, Junko hugs her tightly.

"It's okay, Madoka. Mama's here for you. You can cry as much as you want to." She gently pats her back as tears continue to soak her shirt front.

A few minutes, and one good cry later, all that's left are small hiccups in place of lingering tears.

"Have you calmed down?" Junko asks, pulling away. She affectionately brushes Madoka's bangs back.

Embarrassed, Madoka nods, wiping her tears with her hand as she sniffles. "U-Uh huh..."

Junko glances around, and spots the box of tissues sitting on the desk. A quick stride over, before she returns, holding it out to Madoka. "Here, blow your nose."

She nods and does as told.

Junko retakes her seat, waiting expectantly as Madoka gathers her thoughts.

She sees those now swollen pink eyes look up to her.

"Mama..." Madoka swallows nervously. There are some things she can't say, but, some things she can. "I... I think there's something wrong with Homura-chan."

Junko frowns. "What do you mean, Madoka?"

Madoka fidgets with her pajama shirt. "...She... She has nightmares. Every night."

"Nightmares? Do you know what about?"

Madoka shakes her head. "N-No... but... she always wakes up crying..."

"...And this has happened every night since she moved in?"

Madoka nods. "A-Also... uhm..." She blushes lightly. "W-We were getting to know each other earlier," Junko's eyes widen and Madoka quickly shakes her head. "N-Not like that! I-I was just asking her questions!"

A skeptical look, but Junko nods, signaling her to continue.

"A-And... Homura-chan... she couldn't answer most of them..." Madoka says softly. "Even simple things, Mama. I... don't think she even remembers when her birthday is."

The scowl on Junko's face has Madoka taken aback.

"No, I'm not mad at you, Madoka. I'm just..." Junko takes a deep breath, before exhaling slowly. "Alright. Thank you, for telling me Madoka. Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

Madoka glances down. "E-Earlier... when you asked if we were doing anything that's hurting us... Homura-chan..." She glances back up. "...Homura-chan is pushing herself too hard. S-She... She tries to do everything by herself," she blinks back more tears, "and I can see how tired she is, and h-how much she's in pain... but..."

Junko holds out the tissue box, and Madoka gives her a teary smile, before she pulls out a few more tissues.

She dabs at her eyes. "...I-I think... t-there's problems with her heart that she's hiding. S-She doesn't say anything, but I can tell..."

Junko settles the box onto her lap, eyes cast to the floor as she mulls over Madoka's words.

She sighs softly, causing Madoka to look at her. "Alright. That, is another thing I need to address with her. Thank you, for telling me Madoka."

Madoka nods.

Junko leans back as she stares up at the ceiling. "...I was planning on slowly easing her into her own room after this weekend..." She closes her eyes tiredly. "But..."

Madoka blinks. "What's this weekend, Mama?"

Junko lowers her head, eyes opening as she gives Madoka a sad smile. "Actually, this is the original reason why I'm talking to you today, Madoka." She shakes her head. "I didn't expect to get hit with sudden overtime this week, and I've been trying to clear my schedule, but it doesn't seem like I'll be able to make it. I spoke with your Grandma and Grandpa, and they're willing to watch Takkun, but, Homura needs emotional support, not a chaperone."

"Mama...?"

"This weekend is the funeral for Homura's mother, Madoka."

Madoka feels something catch in her throat. She had completely forgotten.

"And though she hasn't said anything, I think it would be good for Homura to go. I was planning on accompanying her, but, as she isn't a blood relative, it'll be very hard to convince my boss to leave this project for my assistant to handle..."

Madoka nods slowly in understanding. She wonders if Homura even remembers—or if she is trying her best to forget.

"Madoka."

"Yes, Mama?"

"...I'm still a bit on the fence, because it feels like you're still not telling me everything. But I know that for Homura, you're the only one that she trusts. I want you to go with Homura to Tokyo, and accompany her to the funeral."

"E-Eh?" Madoka can only stare wide eyed at her mother.

"I thought of asking Kazuko to go with you two... but... it'll be the same situation if I asked Papa to go instead." She raises an eyebrow. "And, despite everything, I know I can trust you, Madoka."

Madoka sits up straight, still staring.

"I already researched a few hotels that allow minors to stay at, as long as a parent sends in their consent and I pay the deposit upfront. The funeral is Saturday, so you will two need to leave on Friday." She pauses. "I did talk to Kazuko, and both of you seem to be doing well with your grades. You, especially, since Homura has started helping you with your homework. She's fine with you two missing a few days, and she will talk to the other teachers as well. I'll give you access to my credit line; spend a few extra days there. Help Homura cope with things, alright? Help her, so that she is able to say 'goodbye.'"

Madoka nods, immediately reminded that it's not a trip for fun. The thought of having to say 'goodbye' to someone makes her stomach twist.

A hand is suddenly on her head, and she looks up to see her mom grinning at her.

"You're growing up, Madoka. Consider this one of your first real tests to becoming an adult."

Madoka is about to respond, but her mouth opens in protest as her mother suddenly messes up her hair.

"Mama!"

Junko grins as Madoka glares at her, hair now sticking at odd ends.

"Madoka. I trust you, alright?" She repeats. "Don't let me down."

Madoka nods, throwing her mother a salute. "Yes, of course, Mama!"

Junko stretches, arms reaching above. "Whew. Talking so seriously makes my shoulders stiff."

In the middle of fixing her hair, Madoka glances over. "Isn't it because you're working so hard, Mama?"

Junko grins. "Maybe. Anyways, let's go join Homura and Papa; I can already imagine how Homura is handling being alone with him."

Madoka nods. "Yeah... but..." She gently dabs at her puffy eyes as Junko remembers her soaked shirt.

"...After we clean up," they both say at the same time.

Madoka's grin matches her mother's.

/

The soft tink of glass. The light hiss of the flame.

Homura sits, eyes watching as the small fire dances, a sharp blue swaying from side to side as something lightly bubbles inside the cocoa maker.

Tomohisa is behind the counter as always.

And they're both quiet as they wait for the other two to join them.

"It's almost ready," he says suddenly.

As expected, Homura jumps.

She keeps her head bowed, and he is acknowledged with a brief dart of lavender in his direction.

More silence, until finally it's broken by a soft chuckle.

Homura blinks. She glances over in confusion, only to be met with Tomohisa's kind eyes and gentle smile.

"You know, when I first saw you, Homura-chan, you reminded me of the first time I met Junko. A quiet, cool beauty."

She glances away, but another chuckle has her looking back.

"But, seeing you sitting there like that, I realize that you remind me more of myself."

She blinks, and he continues smiling.

"I know our situations are a bit different, but, when I was younger, due to certain circumstances... I ended up living with my grandparents." He leans against the counter, eyes distant as he remembers things she can't see. "And you know, anyone that doesn't have the ideal, nuclear family..." he trails off, but she understands.

He's still smiling though.

"...For the longest time, I always wondered, 'what's wrong with me?' 'Is it something I did?' 'If I'm good, if I do everything they tell me, will my parents take me back?'" He shakes his head. "When that didn't work, I thought, maybe, if I acted out, if I got their attention in a different way, they'd look at me again."

Her hands are hidden under the table, and they twist in her lap at his words.

"...It took a while, until I finally realized that it wasn't me. That I wasn't the problem. That maybe, they were the problem all along, and I was a mere casualty." His lips tug into a fond smile. "Junko, was the one who taught me that. She was... is, an amazing woman, and I'm lucky she found me." He turns to Homura. "...Family, Homura-chan, aren't just those who are related to you by blood. They're the ones that help nurture you, and are there both for the good, and the bad. And, well, I hope that we can be to you, like what my grandparents were to me, Homura-chan. They weren't my real parents, but they were there for me. Just like Junko and I hope to be there for you."

She has trouble swallowing. She lowers her head, afraid to look into his eyes—afraid of the kindness she sees in there that reminds her so much of Madoka.

Another soft laugh. "Aha, listen to me, sounding all arrogant."

She glances up.

"...But, we're both lucky, aren't we, Homura-chan? The Kaname women sure are amazing."

She can't help it—she blushes at his knowing look.

"The cocoa is about done," he says, tactfully steering the conversation around.

He's pouring when there's a sound through the hallway.

They both turn, and in steps Madoka, shortly followed by Junko, who is now dressed in a red jersey.

Madoka grins when she finds Homura staring at her.

"Now, what were you two up?" Junko asks, moving to the kitchen.

"Hmm." Tomohisa glances to Homura. "Nothing, really," he says, smiling.

Madoka takes the seat next to Homura. "Really? You two just sat here waiting for the cocoa?"

Tomohisa and Homura share another look, though this time Homura's lips twitch lightly.

"Really," Tomohisa replies again.

Madoka stares at them suspiciously. She turns to Homura, who nervously looks away.

Homura glances to Tomohisa, who gives her a fast wink as he briefly places his finger to his lips.

Madoka whirls on him, but he feigns interest at the cups.

Homura looks down.

The usual oppressive feeling in her chest seems lighter, somehow.

\\

Curtains and window opened, she's resting her arms against the window sill, eyes staring out into the quiet city that sleeps outside.

Absent expression on her face, there's a brief moment where she remembers reading a play where the love interest sits at her window, waiting for her prince to come.

There's no romance here, however.

She's worried.

Despite her best attempts to convince her to stay home, Homura had insisted on that hour of patrol.

And now, Madoka is alone in her room, waiting until Homura returns.

A soft meow besides her, and she glances down at Amy who rubs her face against her arm.

"Amy..." A small smile, before she reaches over to scratch Amy's ears. "I hope Homura-chan doesn't push herself too hard..."

"Meow." A soft purr.

Madoka sighs. "Homura-chan..."

Amy suddenly perks her ears up. She pulls away from Madoka with a hiss.

"Amy?"

Her tail is puffed, and she's stiff under Madoka's touch.

/Hello, Kaname Madoka/

She jumps and immediately turns back to the window.

Kyuubey now sits perched atop the sill. She barely suppresses a shiver at the familiar sight of his red, beady eyes.

"...Kyuubey." She ignores how her heart beats loudly in her chest. She tightens her hold on Amy. "W—" She swallows. "What do you want?"

His tail swishes from side to side. /It is rather difficult to chat with you alone/

Another hiss from Amy.

"Shh, Amy," Madoka murmurs, trying to calm her. "...Why are you looking for me?"

He tilts his head. /I just thought you would like to know, because I'm not sure if you're aware of Akemi Homura's condition/

She narrows her eyes. "W-What are you talking about?"

/Her heart seems to be weakening. I would say if she continues at her current rate, there's a high chance it may fail on her/

She has to remind herself to breathe; that Kyuubey may be twisting words around. "...And how would you know this?"

Another swish of his tail. /We met, last night. She didn't seem to be faring too well after a few minutes of combat/

Madoka grits her teeth. "You—"

Amy suddenly darts away from her hands, brandishing her claws at Kyuubey.

He dodges the swipe with a small jump, landing a bit away.

"Amy!" Madoka barely remembers to keep her voice down.

/With your potential, Kaname Madoka, you could restore Akemi Homura's body to a condition healthier than her magic could ever make her/

Amy hisses, and he turns to regard her.

/...Attachments to animals that humans consider 'pets' has always been intriguing. As are the attachments of animals to their human owners/

Amy has her head lowered, tail raised.

/Animals do not possess the same mental capacity as humans, and yet, they are also weighed down by emotions. She seems to view me with animosity, mimicking the views of her owner/

Her tail sways from side to side.

/It is unfortunate we cannot harvest animals the same way as humans, but—/

Before Madoka can stop her, Amy pounces.

"Amy! No!" Another yell that's whispered.

Kyuubey anticipates her movements, and jumps away from the window.

With no hesitation, Amy gives chase.

"No!" Hands gripping the window frame, Madoka helplessly stares, watching as Kyuubey and Amy bound off the walls, landing onto the streets below.

Moving quickly, she rushes out the door to follow.

/I do agree that Akemi Homura's situation with yours is different. You two can communicate, whereas most humans and animals are limited to visual clues, and physical contact/

He hops to the side as Amy tries to tackle him.

/And while it is not effective to raise animals the same as magical girls.../

He darts forward, further into the streets when he notices Madoka stepping out from her front door, head moving as she tries to locate Amy.

"Amy!" It's a hushed whisper, but her voice carries through the quiet night.

/...animals are still a good way to incite an incentive/

Madoka sees the flash of black and white and immediately takes off after them, bare feet thudding with each step.

She presses forward, a cold sweat now running down her back.

If anything happened to Amy—Homura would be devastated.

And it would be entirely her fault.

She urges her body to move faster, ignoring the small pebbles and gravel that dig into her skin. She stops when she spots Kyuubey and Amy staring each other down on the empty streets.

He faces her, eyes glinting from the streetlights above. /You have enough power to become a god, Kaname Madoka. You could save Akemi Homura/

He ducks another swipe from Amy.

/You could change things as you seem fit/

He runs to the side, Amy following. She pounces once more.

"Amy!"

Eyes narrowed and concentrated on the prey in front of her, Amy ignores Madoka's panicked yells.

"Amy! No!"

Kyuubey is leading her into circles; a continuous chase where he dodges, and she renews her attempts to tag him.

"AMY!"

/...You could save her, too, Kaname Madoka/

A perk of her ears, Amy finally hears the sounds of tires rolling on asphalt. She turns, and her eyes are immediately blinded by the bright headlights approaching at a steady speed.

She sits there, frozen, as she feels the rumble of metal thundering closer.

A clear picture flashes in Madoka's mind—

A small, black cat lying in the middle of the street.

Blood dripping from its half opened mouth as red pools from open wounds.

The rapid rise and fall of its chest as it struggles to breathe.

Choking down a sob, Madoka dashes forward.

Once close enough, she kneels in front of Amy, and picks her up. She scrambles to move away—but she's not fast enough.

Bright lights. The low bellow of the horn in warning.

A shout, and the squeal as the brakes are slammed as the driver tries to avoid her.

'I'm sorry, Homura-chan.'

/

Her heart jumps when she feels a hand on her shoulder.

She opens her eyes, where she's greeted with white, and then black.

Arms wrap around her, and the familiar scent of strawberry under her nose.

Her eyes widen. "H-Homura-chan...?"

A cough. "Y-You're okay, Madoka." Another cough, before Homura rubs her face against Madoka's. "Y-You're okay."

"Homura-chan? H-How...?"

More coughs has Madoka quickly trying to pull away.

"Homura-chan?"

"W-We need to move... M-Ma...doka..."

Homura moves to stand, and Madoka only feels her worry increase when Homura stumbles, only to end up leaning heavily against her.

"Meow."

Amy squeezes out from the small gap in between them, her head stretching as her rough tongue licks Homura's cheek.

"Meow."

Cough. "I-I know, Amy..."

Madoka loops her arms around Homura's waist, and helps her to her feet.

"B-Behind the wall," Homura murmurs.

Madoka nods. They move slowly, and as soon as they're around the corner, Homura releases her magic.

The loud squeal continues, and a second later, there's the sound as a car door opens.

"W-Where did she go?"

Madoka peeks out from their cover, and she sees the figure of a man spinning around in confusion.

"I-I must be more tired than I thought..."

She watches as he climbs back into the car.

The slam of the door, followed by the screech as he drives away.

Madoka breathes a sigh of relief, though it doesn't last long as she turns to Homura.

Her soul gem is out, held towards her heart once again.

Amy hisses, and Madoka quickly throws herself against Homura.

/You are dying, Akemi Homura/

Homura grits her teeth, ignoring Kyuubey as she heals.

/Magic can only do so much. Miki Sayaka's disruption of your protective barrier seems to have hastened your condition somehow/

Madoka feels something snap. "You...!" Her jaw clenches, and she grips Homura's arms tightly.

Metal ring now around her finger, Homura gently nudges Madoka with her head to calm her.

She turns to Kyuubey, eyes narrowed. "Leave."

He swishes his tail as Amy hisses once more.

He lowers his head, and slowly slinks back into the darkness.

When Kyuubey doesn't reappear, Madoka finally relaxes. She closes her eyes, leaning her head against Homura's.

Arms wrap around her, drawing her close.

"...I'm sorry, Madoka. I shouldn't have left you alone..."

Madoka grips Homura's shirt tightly.

There's plenty she wants to say. Instead, she remains quiet, taking comfort in Homura's arms.

"W-We should head back inside, Madoka."

Madoka opens her eyes. She lifts her head, turning it to place a kiss on Homura's cheek.

She can feel Homura stiffen at her touch.

"M-Madoka...?"

Madoka holds her tighter as she buries her face in the crook of Homura's neck.

She remembers Kyuubey's words.

She doesn't want to believe it, but she has a feeling that he's telling the truth.

And the thought of Homura disappearing from her life, makes her heart hur**t.**

AN: Ahh**.** A month since the last update. I wonder how I ever did updates every week...? Sometimes I don't feel like writing at all...

Surely none of you forgot about the funeral, though, right? Anyways, I hope the chapter answers some questions, and at least seems plausible on some things. Also, Kyuubey is an opportunist. He's not exactly evil, but he will take an opportunity when he sees it.

Updates will probably be just as slow now, since I really have no idea where the story is going. I have a vague idea of Tokyo, but beyond that is hazy.

As always, thanks for reading/reviewing ! Newww and old people :)) I will properly thank everyone one day, but that is not today. But I do recognize a lot of you! Again, thank you!

Chapter 23: heroes

Five minutes before the alarm rings, she shifts in bed, and her eyes slowly open.

She reaches out, and after a bit of fumbling, the clock is in her hands as her eyes squint at the time.

A stifled yawn, before the alarm is turned off, and the clock is returned to her side.

She pushes the blankets off as she sits up.

A light crack of her neck, followed by a stretch of her arms.

It's quiet, and a glance through her window shows dull sunlight peeking through.

Like every morning, she bunches her hands into fists, and with a quiet 'Alright!' she psyches herself up for the day.

A slap of her cheeks, and then a nod, before she stands from her bed.

As she passes the vanity in her room, her footsteps pause as she stares at her reflection.

Blonde hair, and golden eyes.

Lonely, but, she turns away.

She's not alone anymore.

\\

She doesn't dream often, and when she does, it's usually more like a nightmare.

It's not that different today, except it feels so real.

As her eyes open, she finds her eyesight blurry, and to her horror, her face is wet.

She quickly wipes the tears away with the back of her hand, angry that she had dreamt once more.

Lingering traces still remain, and it feels like she can hear the soft thuds from the chopping block, and smell miso soup in the air.

Breakfast, like how her mother used to make.

She closes her eyes, trying to forget, but when the sounds continue, she realizes that they're real.

Her eyes open, and as she sits up, the blanket draped over her—when had that gotten there?— slowly slides down to the carpeted floor.

It takes her a moment, until she remembers she's at Mami's, and that she had fallen asleep on the couch.

A slow exhale, before she shakes her head, suddenly feeling really stupid.

After so long, she would think she would be used to it by now.

/

"...Be sure to message me the information later, Homura."

She nods, eyes cast to the ground as one hand grips her toothbrush tightly.

The thought of returning to Tokyo, of attending her mother's funeral makes her stomach churn.

She blinks when there's something gently placed on her head, and when she looks up, Junko is smiling at her—with an expression that she doesn't quite understand, but one that makes her feel undeniably nostalgic.

"When you two come back, hopefully my project will be done by then. We'll go out for dinner and a movie. As a family."

She freezes at those words, and her toothbrush is forgotten.

With wide eyes, she continues staring at Junko, who responds by moving closer.

Perfume fills her senses, and she quickly tries to blink back tears as a memory from long ago hits her.

Light pressure atop of her head, before Junko pulls away.

"I need to get to work now, so I will see you girls later tonight, alright?"

Madoka nods, even though she keeps most of her attention on Homura, who's still frozen in place.

"Okay, Mama. Good luck!"

An echo of a clap as they high five, and then Junko exits the bathroom.

Madoka turns to Homura. With a gentle smile on her face, she gathers her in her arms, and holds her close.

"You're okay, Homura-chan. You'll be okay."

/

Her hand slams down on her clock; the fifth time within 15 minutes.

She rolls over in bed, curling in her legs and wanting nothing more than to go back to sleep.

When the sixth ring of her alarm clock goes off, she groans, and her arms wrap around her head to mute the sound.

Her door is thrown open, and before she can react, her blankets are torn from her grasp.

"Sayaka! Wake up already! You're going to be late if you keep this up!"

She answers with a groan, and her mother responds by pulling her until she's sitting up.

"Go get ready, breakfast is almost done."

One eye blearily cracks open. "...alright."

Footsteps as her mother leaves the room. "And you better not go back to sleep."

She waits until she's sure her mother is gone, before she falls back into her bed.

She sighs softly. She doesn't want to go to school.

She doesn't want to see Hitomi, or Kyousuke.

She closes her eyes.

/

"...It's rare to see you up so early, Kyouko."

Kyouko shrugs. "It happens."

Mami eyes her for a moment, before she continues setting the table.

A bowl of rice joins the bowl of miso soup. A plate with broiled fish, and a few steamed vegetables.

"Thanks," Kyouko mumbles.

Mami sits with a smile across of her face. "You're welcome."

Kyouko has her head bowed, hands clasped in front of her, and Mami politely waits until she's done.

Crimson eyes flicker to her briefly. "...Itadakimasu."

"Itadakimasu."

They both dig into their meal, quiet as they eat.

And Kyouko tries her best to ignore that stare, but eventually she sits up, and glares at the blonde.

"What?" she snaps. "Is there something on my face?"

Mami shakes her head even as her smile remains. "No. I apologize, Kyouko. It's just—it feels nice, to not eat alone."

Kyouko swallows her mouthful as she averts her eyes.

A moment later, a soft 'Yeah' is heard from her mouth.

Mami smiles wider, and their conversation drifts back into silence.

It isn't until she's halfway done with her food, that Mami lowers her chopsticks and turns to Kyouko once more, waiting until she's acknowledged by another glare.

"...What?"

Mami clears her throat. "Kyouko... it's... I think you should consider going back to school."

Both her eyebrows raise, and her mouth is still full as she replies. "Schwool?"

Mami ignores her bad manners, and nods. "Yes. After Shizuki-san mentioned it... I think it would really be a good idea for you to continue with your education."

Kyouko sets her bowl onto the table as she swallows her food. "School..."

Mami nods. "School. I looked into it, and you'll need to take a placement test, which shouldn't be too hard; I can tutor you, and I'm sure any of the other girls would be willing to help. It'll be tricky obtaining your records from your previous school, but that shouldn't be that difficult, as long as you have a legal guardian... I can ask my relatives, as they're already registered in the foster system..."

"*School,*" she repeats. "You want me to go back to school..."

"Yes, Kyouko. It's..." Mami glances down. "...Isn't it about time you started living like normal?"

Kyouko's chopsticks slam into the table as she glares at her. "Normal? You think we're *normal*? We gotta fight Witches in order to stay alive, and you're telling me that we're normal?" She gestures around. "What part of this is normal to you?"

Mami sighs. "I know, Kyouko. It's just—"

"Just what, Mami? You think that we're going to live—like normal, regular girls?" she spits out. "That we're going to go to school, and—and hang out with our friends? What next? You gonna tell me that I should get a boyfriend, and get married, and—"

"Kyouko!"

She snaps her mouth shut, jaw set as she angrily glares to the side.

"I know, that we're not... we're not normal," Mami says softly. "I understand that, as much as you do."

She winces when she realizes what Mami is referring to.

"It's—just school. I'm not telling you to make the decision right now, but to please think about it."

"...Fine. Whatever. Can I have more rice?"

"Yes, of course." Mami stands, and accepts Kyouko's empty bowl into her hands.

She walks over to the kitchen, and returns a moment later with one filled with rice.

"Thanks," Kyouko mutters as Mami places it down onto the table.

Mami waits for her to take a few bites, before she adds in, "Also, if you attend school, you'll be able to see Sayaka more often."

Food immediately goes down the wrong pipe as Kyouko chokes.

Once that's clear, she glares at Mami. "W-Why would I want to see her more often!?"

Mami smiles to herself, not bothering to reply as she sips at her soup.

/

"...You need to be more careful."

"Meow."

"I can take care of myself. It's you that I'm worried about."

"Meow."

"I don't care what he said! I'm going to be gone this weekend, and I don't want to have to worry about you getting hit by a car!"

"Meow."

She narrows her eyes. "*I am fine,*" she hisses. "How am I supposed to trust you to take of yourself, if you're going to run after him every time you see him?"

Hackles now raised, Amy hisses back.

She doesn't notice her own ears and tail have appeared, and they're flat against her head as she glares. "You're supposed to be taking care of her! Do you know what would've happened if I hadn't gotten there in time?!"

Another hiss.

She bares her teeth in response, ignoring her elevated heartbeat.

"Homura-chan! Stop it! Calm down!"

They both turn, and Homura catches a glimpse of pink, before she's tackled by Madoka.

"Ma-Mado...ka?" She leans against the other girl, her breaths now coming out in gasps.

"Calm down, Homura-chan," Madoka repeats as her hands rub Homura's back. "I'm fine and Amy is fine, okay?"

She coughs, and Madoka holds her closer.

"You're okay, Homura-chan. You're okay." She doesn't know if she's telling Homura this, or if she's saying it out loud for herself.

Eventually, Homura's breaths calm, and she pulls away with a small sigh. "S-Sorry..."

"Meow."

She turns, and Amy presses her head against her hand. "...I'm sorry too, Amy. I just—please be more careful, okay? I—I don't want anything to happen to you..."

Madoka tries to swallow her anger and only half succeeds.

With an angry glare, she holds Homura closer.

Why couldn't Homura think the same about herself?

\

She's shoveling bread into her mouth, trying to finish her breakfast before she needs to run to meet up with the others, when there's a beep from her pocket.

Curious, she pulls out her phone and immediately skims the message.

"Oh."

Her mother looks up. "What's wrong, Sayaka?"

"Uh, I forgot I have classroom duties today, so I'll be home a bit late."

Even as her mother's eyes narrow, she keeps her face neutral, and after a moment, her mother sighs.

"Remember to come home right when you're done."

She nods. "Yeah, of course!"

"...You should hurry up, or you will really be late."

She checks the time.

"Ahh!"

\

"...so you two will be absent tomorrow?"

Madoka nods, answering for Homura who is quietly standing beside her.

"I see." Hitomi glances at their clasped hands, and finds that it's easier to ignore since she has seen it for days now. "I hope everything is alright, Akemi-san."

Lavender flickers her way, before they once again concentrate on the trees above.

Madoka feels bad for lying, but it's not her place to tell Hitomi exactly why they're not going to be here.

And for once, she's glad that the other girl is from a high class family; she's too polite to demand an answer even though Madoka knows she wants to know.

"So uhm, we'll be relying on you for notes, Hitomi-chan!"

Hitomi nods. "Of course, Madoka-san. You can count on me."

They exchange smiles.

Another brief moment of silence, before Hitomi turns to Madoka once more.

"Sayaka-san... is she doing better today?"

Unsaid words of yesterday's confrontation are spoken, and Madoka nods.

"When I messaged her earlier, she said she was going to come to school..." A glance around. "...I think she's just late?"

Hitomi absently tucks her hair behind her ear. "Madoka-san... yesterday... that is..." She clears her throat.

Madoka grips Homura's hand tighter; if she was being honest with herself, she would admit that she's still angry at Sayaka.

Homura looks over, but Madoka keeps her eyes on the ground, trying to squish that ball of anger down.

"I'm... not sure how things are with her for sure, Hitomi-chan," she eventually murmurs. "I didn't... really speak to her much, after..."

"I see."

Madoka sighs. "...Sayaka-chan sure is taking her time," she comments as she checks her phone. "Do you think we should wait for her?"

"...I'd give her at least a few more minutes, before we need to leave in order to make it by the first bell," Hitomi says as she searches for blue in the approaching crowd.

Madoka tiptoes, searching for Sayaka as well. "Ah, I think I see her?"

"I believe so, Madoka-san."

As soon as Sayaka is close enough, Madoka points at her. "You're late, Sayaka-chan! We were about to leave without you!"

"S-Sorry!" she says in between breaths. "My snooze button—works too well."

A tense moment as looks are exchanged.

"We should hurry," Hitomi says, breaking the silence.

Sayaka nods. "S-sure..."

They start walking, Sayaka and Hitomi taking the lead as Madoka and Homura walk behind them.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura glances to her. "Yes, Madoka?"

"...You've been really quiet. Are you alright?"

Homura blinks. She glances to the trees absently as she mulls over Madoka's question.

Is she alright?

She feels Madoka squeeze her hand, and she looks to their intertwined fingers.

Maybe.

She squeezes back, and a second later, Madoka is close enough that their arms are touching.

She can feel eyes on her, and she's not surprised when she finds green staring.

She ignores her, and continues walking next to Madoka as the other girl fills in the silence with aimless chatter.

/

Arms filled with her usual stash of milk, Homura stands by the stairs, hidden in the shadows as she watches the others who have already started eating their lunch.

Gone are the laughs usually heard as they eat, and she can tell there's something sitting atop of everyone's shoulders as they try and pretend that everything is okay.

Even from here, she can see the strained smile across Madoka's face.

When she sees gold flicker her way, she knows that Mami knows she's standing here, watching.

No doubt she's wondering *why*, when it's obvious that Madoka is waiting for her.

Still, she hangs back.

It'll be a little more than a week—until Walpurgisnacht will appear.

And a lot of things can happen in that time.

Will Sayaka make it? Will Mami?

Will Kyouko?

And more importantly—

Will Madoka?

She exhales slowly, tightening her arms around those boxes of milk.

...And, will she?

She shakes her head, and with two steps, the shadows disappear as she walks outside.

Madoka immediately sees her, and brightens.

As soon as she reaches the bench, she starts handing out milk to the other girls.

And—even though she knows something is still hanging in the air, it almost feels like things have subsided, just a little.

She glances down to her drink curiously, not at all understanding that it's her own presence that has changed things.

\\

She'd be lying if she said she wasn't nervous.

After school, and she's walking with Madoka as they make their way to the teacher's lounge.

Saotome-sensei had asked to speak with them earlier that day.

She knows it has something to do with their absence, but it still makes her nervous all the same.

Anxiety of the unknown, and fear that stems from her old self who hates being confronted, has her palms sweaty, and she lets go of Madoka's hand to wipe them dry against her skirt.

Madoka presses close against her. "It'll be fine, Homura-chan," she murmurs.

Homura nods; just hearing Madoka saying it out loud calms her ever so slightly.

All too soon, they reach their destination.

A polite knock, before an 'excuse me' is murmured as they enter.

To her relief, it's mostly empty, and they both walk to over to where their teacher is waiting for them.

As soon as they approach, Saotome-sensei holds out a hand, and gestures to the seats across from her. "Please sit, Akemi-san, Kaname-san."

Both girls take a seat, and they watch as Satome-sensei takes in a deep breath, before exhaling. She then turns to them with a smile.

One hand reaches out, and Homura finds her hand clasped.

"...I heard from Junko what happened," she says.

Homura stiffens, but that hand pats hers.

"You don't need to worry about school or anything when you two are gone, alright? I have spoken to all your teachers, and they understand that you two will be absent."

Homura nods even as her eyes remain on the floor. "...Thank you."

She tries to pull her hand away, but that slightly larger one holds hers tighter. She glances up.

With eyes shining from unshed tears, Saotome-sensei gives her a smile. "Akemi-san. Listen to me, alright?"

She nods slowly, even as she remains confused.

"...Life, is unpredictable. One day, you may wake up, still in love with your boyfriend of two years, and the next, you'll find out that he left his clothes on the sofa once more, even though you remind him every day that he should pick up after himself..."

Homura glances to Madoka, whose lips twitch with slight amusement.

"...And you'll argue, and things will escalate, and maybe you'll find that you don't love each other like how you used to."

Homura tilts her head.

"...What I'm saying is that, things happen, but you have to remember that emotions stay with you forever."

Homura blinks.

"When I first saw you, Akemi-san, you seemed, well, lonely. I was worried that you wouldn't get along with the other students." She looks to Madoka. "But, I'm glad to see you have found friends that have accepted you for who you are."

Madoka looks down, suddenly feeling shy.

"When things are sad, Akemi-san, it's alright to cry. When you're angry, it's alright to get mad. Yell all you want; cry all you want." She squeezes Homura's hand, before finally letting go. "It's alright, okay? Even sensei has days when it feels like the world is against me, but," she smiles, "that's what your emotions are for; they are there for you to cope. But remember, that they do not control you. You aren't alone, Akemi-san." She turns to Madoka, "your friends are there for you, and sensei is here for you."

Homura concentrates on the floor, and it's taking everything she has to keep whatever she has bottled inside from spilling out.

She blinks rapidly, and can only manage a small nod in reply.

Saotome-sensei sits up. "And please, remember to stay safe in Tokyo. Sensei would be devastated if anything happened to you two."

Madoka nods. "Y-Yes, of course, Saotome-sensei. I-If that's all...?"

"Yes, I will see you two when you come back."

Madoka helps Homura to her feet.

"Thank you, Saotome-sensei," she says softly.

"I am always here for any of my students."

They both bow.

Madoka exchanges a smile with Saotome-sensei. She then loops one arm around Homura's waist, and starts leading her outside.

One last glance, before they're out the door.

\

Walking side by side, Madoka is holding Homura's hand as they head to their classroom to retrieve their bags.

A glance around, and most of the classrooms they pass are empty.

Homura is quiet, and after a quick check, Madoka finds her looking more composed, but gaze still absent.

She leans against her, and finally, Homura turns to look at her.

Another quick glance around, before Madoka raises their clasped hands.

"Madoka...?"

She smiles, and kisses Homura's fingertips. Homura blushes, and though her own cheeks feel warm, Madoka gives Homura another smile.

"I'm here, Homura-chan."

She sees those stiff shoulders relax slightly, before Homura leans against her.

"...Thank you, Madoka."

She closes her eyes.

One hurdle at a time...

/

"Everything alright there?"

They both look up to find Sayaka and Mami staring at them expectantly.

Madoka nods, and she and Homura make their way to join the other two. "Yes, Saotome-sensei just wanted to check some things."

Sayaka wants to ask questions, but Mami cuts in first. "Well, that is good then. Shall we head over to my apartment for this meeting that Akemi-chan wanted?" She glances to Sayaka. "I'm sure there is a good reason you wanted us to have it today."

Homura nods. "Yes. I will tell you when we get there. There are some things we need to discuss, and I would rather have all of us together."

"Yes, of course." Mami starts leading the way, her hand reaching for Sayaka's arm as she drags the other girl to walk next to her.

Sayaka opens her mouth, but when gold flickers her way, she decides that she'll wait.

Madoka remains by Homura's side, and they walk the rest of the way to Mami's in companionable silence.

\

As they step through the doorway, Kyouko greets them from the couch with a 'yo!' that's halfway interrupted by a yawn.

"...What do you even do all day?" Sayaka asks as she steps onto plush carpet.

Kyouko shrugs. "TV. Game center. Wit—" her speech is interrupted by another yawn.

"I'll go get the snacks ready," Mami murmurs as she veers off to the kitchen.

A quick glance to Homura, who nods, before Madoka follows after her. "I'll help, Mami-chan!"

Homura takes a seat on the empty side of the couch, leaning against the back as she settles in.

Sayaka, now seated in front of the triangular table, looks at her. "So, what's this meeting about, anyways...?"

Homura shrugs as Kyouko sits up, interest now showing in her quirked eyebrow.

"...I will tell everyone once we are all assembled. There are some things I do not wish to repeat."

Sayaka sighs, but relents.

"That said..." Both turn to Homura who is now staring at Sayaka, "...have you resolved your own situation, Miki Sayaka?"

Sayaka winces, and her eyes are suddenly concentrated on the surface of the table.

"I noticed you were avoiding Kamijou Kyousuke all through our classes, and dodging any inquiries from Shizuki Hitomi."

Sayaka scowls. "It... doesn't concern you."

Homura sighs. Just as she's about to reply, Sayaka continues.

"But—yeah... I just... need a bit. I'll... speak to Hitomi about it tomorrow."

Homura nods, eyes closing as she tilts her head back. "You seem to be doing okay; you must have made a decision. I hope it is not one you regret..."

Sayaka exhales slowly, trying to keep her irritation in check. She doesn't understand her irrational anger at the other girl, and why something in her gut always tells her not to trust her.

Kyouko interrupts with another loud yawn. Sayaka turns to her, and before she can help it, she feels something prickling at the back of her throat, and she yawns as well.

Kyouko smirks. "You totally lost."

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Sayaka shakes her head. "Whatever."

Kyouko reaches over, and with a loud smack, she whacks Homura's arm with her hand.

"...Ow." Lavender slowly opens to glare at her. "Yes...?"

"Nothing, you just looked about to fall asleep there, even though you're the one who called this meeting."

She's expecting a sarcastic reply, but instead, Homura merely runs her hand over her face, and they both notice it—she looks exhausted.

Kyouko opens her mouth—but the rattle of dishware is heard, and they all turn to see Mami and Madoka balancing trays in their hands.

Crimson lights up at the sight of food, and she scrambles off the couch to the table faster than anyone can blink.

Before she can stop herself, Sayaka laughs.

Kyouko glares at her. "What?"

"You're like—a puppy!" Her voice is teasing, and Kyouko quickly tries to keep her blush down.

"S-Shut up!"

"Here, Kyouko-chan~" Sayaka says, clapping her hands at the same time. "If you come here, I'll give you a treat!"

A growl from her throat only serves to make Sayaka laugh harder. "I'll show you who's a puppy!"

She lunges for the other girl, but Homura is suddenly taking the spot in between them, not at all looking affected that Kyouko is two steps away from running her fist into her face.

"More than a puppy, she is similar to a fox... in more ways than one," Homura murmurs.

Kyouko blinks. "Eh?"

Homura ignores her, and helps Madoka and Mami distribute the plates and cups around the table. "Sit down, or else you get no treats."

To everyone's amusement, Kyouko plants herself to the floor rather obediently.

Madoka joins Homura's side, deliberately squishing against her, which is acknowledged by a simple glance her way.

A few sips of milk to calm her nerves, Homura waits until everyone has taken a few bites, before she clears her throat.

As expected, all eyes are on her.

She feels Madoka lean against her, and after another deep breath, she opens her mouth.

"...M—" She clears her throat that suddenly feels very dry. "...Madoka and I will be busy this weekend, so unfortunately, we will be unable to help with patrols..."

She reaches for her cup, and tries her best to keep her hands steady as she takes another sip.

She's only half successful.

Mami glances at her, her own hands in her lap as she evaluates Homura's actions. "...Would it be alright if we asked the reason, Akemi-chan?"

She finishes the rest of her milk, and there's a small clatter as she places the cup back onto its coaster.

Madoka grabs her hand. "Homura-chan? I could..."

"No," she murmurs. "I'll... but, thank you, Madoka."

"...Alright."

Another heavy swallow.

This—shouldn't be that hard.

"We'll be in Tokyo, to attend my mother's funeral." Her voice cracks at the end, and she angrily grits her teeth as Madoka squeezes her hand.

She takes a moment to judge their reactions, and, she's not surprised to see that Mami and Kyouko are quiet.

Sayaka looks lost—maybe because she doesn't quite know how to deal with something like this.

"...Please take all the time you need, Akemi-chan." Mami looks up with a gentle smile—and it reminds her so much of a different Mami, that she has to glance away.

"Yeah," Kyouko grunts out. "S'not like you're really needed here, anyways. We've been handling everything without you perfectly fine; you'd just get in our way. So go do what you gotta do."

Sayaka balls her hands into fists, and looks up. "H-Homura, uh, that is... I-I'm sorry." She's clumsy with her words. "It's, I didn't mean to give you such a hard time, earlier—I—" She swallows. "S-Sorry..."

Homura shakes her head. "That's... It's alright, I'm used to it. Regardless," she bows her head, "...I apologize to everyone, for not being able to pull my weight. I haven't—really done much in preparation for—next week, and—"

"Akemi-chan."

She lifts her head.

"Do not worry about that, alright? We will be fine. We still have time, and you will be back in a few days... But, regarding your trip to Tokyo, will you be alright with just the two of you? I haven't really traveled much, but magical girls are very territorial... I'm not sure I like the idea of just you two being there by yourself, without any allies, especially since Madoka-chan is unarmed..."

She knows Mami isn't blaming her or anything, but Madoka lowers her eyes; she knows just how helpless she is compared to them.

Here, Homura shrugs. "It should be fine. It isn't too difficult to hide my magical signature."

Mami blinks. "...You can hide your magical signature?"

Kyouko raises her eyebrows; she hadn't known this as well.

Homura nods. "We can project our magic outwards in order to increase our receptors. Hiding our magical signature is the opposite: we draw our magic in. Of course, it'll be impossible to completely hide it, but the other person would need to be really close in order to detect me."

Kyouko leans forward, elbows on the table. "Yeah, but I can usually find you pretty easily, Kitty Cat."

She glances over. "...I have no need to use it when I am here as none of you really have a long range compared to mine; I will be able to detect you long before you detect me."

Kyouko scowls. "Prove it."

She sighs. "Very well."

They watch as she closes her eyes, and her ears and tail appear a moment later.

Kyouko and Mami wait, and they can feel Homura's magic drawing back—what once was a bright purple, slowly turns dull. In fact, her ears and tail seem to be almost translucent.

Homura coughs suddenly, and her signature flickers back to normal.

Madoka is immediately at her side. "Homura-chan?"

She presses a hand to her chest, and slowly, the pain subsides as she once again surrounds her heart with her magic. "...Okay, t-that was a bad idea."

"Akemi-chan?"

She shakes her head, and tries to brush off their worries. "A-Anyways, that—"

"Homura-chan!"

She flinches, ears now pressed against her head. "I-I'm fine, Madoka. It was—"

"Stop it! Why do you always do this? Why do you always say you're fine, when you're not!"

Sayaka holds out a hand. "Madoka—calm—"

Madoka whirls on her. "Don't tell me to calm down! This is *your* fault! You're the reason why—" she cuts herself off as angry tears run down her cheeks.

Her lips quiver as she tries to hold back more tears, and Homura stares at her in confusion.

"M-Madoka...?"

Just hearing her voice cracks her resolve, and she turns to Homura with a choked sob.

Unprepared for her tackle, Homura is bowled over, and Madoka is now on top of her, crying into her shoulder.

From the floor, Homura throws Mami a look, pleading for help as her arms wrap around the sobbing girl.

Kyouko sighs. She takes one look at the frozen Sayaka, before she grabs her by the shoulder.

She tilts her head towards the door, and pulls Sayaka to her feet when she doesn't move.

A moment later, the opening, and then the closing of the door as they leave.

Mami sighs softly. She turns to Homura and Madoka. "Akemi-chan, can you please explain what's wrong?"

She had felt—something, but she wants to make sure.

Homura glances away. "N-Not—"

She winces when Madoka pulls away to glare at her with her tear-stained faced.

She exhales."...My heart. I think..."

Mami stares at her for a moment, before she slowly stands to her feet. She walks over to kneel besides them.

"Madoka-chan? Can you please move for just a little bit? I need to see..."

Madoka hiccups. "O-Okay," she murmurs as she crawls off Homura. She remains close by, unwilling to move away too far.

Mami offers Madoka a handkerchief, and then turns to Homura who is now sitting up.

She holds out her hand close to Homura's sternum, and concentrates.

She knows what a healthy heart should feel like; healing meant understanding the human body, as tissue and muscle and bone had to be remade with magic.

And Homura's—

She sucks in a breath. "Akemi-chan. How—" her eyes widen as she remembers Madoka's words. "...Sayaka's power did this?"

Homura is staring at the floor, hands folded in her lap as her ears twitch. "Maybe..." she murmurs.

"C-Can," they both turn to Madoka who's dabbing at her eyes, "can you fix it, somehow, Mami-chan...?"

Mami stares at her hands. Regretfully, she shakes her head.

Madoka grips Homura's arm tighter as the other girl sighs. "I just, need to be more careful, that's all... I'm fi—"

Madoka suddenly has Homura's face in her hands with her forehead pressed against hers. "If you say you're 'fine' Homura-chan, I'm going to be so angry at you."

She tries to swallow her whine, and fails miserably.

Mami stands, and they don't notice that she had left until she's retaking her seat.

She holds up two grief seeds, and pushes them towards Homura. "Please, take these, Akemi-chan. Unfortunately, it's all I have right now, but I will try and get a few more before you leave."

Madoka finally pulls away, and Homura breathes out a sigh of relief.

She turns to Mami, and before she can turn them down, Madoka takes them into her own hands. "I'll hold onto these, Homura-chan. Just in case."

She blinks. "Madoka...?"

Madoka ignores her, and reaches for her bag. "Thank you, Mami-chan."

Mami nods. "Yes, of course."

Homura sighs, but another glare from Madoka has her sitting up in attention.

"...As I'm sure it will be a while until the other two return, would you like another glass of milk, Akemi-chan?"

Homura's ears perk almost immediately. "Y-Yes, please."

Despite her anger, Madoka feels it disappear as she sees how happy Homura looks with just the mention of milk.

She presses her face against Homura's shoulder, still wanting to feel angry, and unwilling to let the other girl see her smile.

/

Hands behind her back, Sayaka trails after Kyouko, quiet as guilt seems to tear at her insides.

She's just been a whole big mess of bad judgment lately, and she's not surprised when Madoka, kind, and gentle Madoka, would finally snap at her.

Her hands tighten; she wants to deny that it was her fault, but she knows—that she had taken that step.

Her own hands tucked in her jacket pockets, Kyouko glances behind her, to the Sayaka who's stewing in her own misery.

She sighs. "...Do you even know why Pinky was upset?"

Sayaka blinks; she had forgotten Kyouko was there. She glances down to the floor. "Homura..."

Kyouko pulls out a box of pocky. She shakes the box to grab her attention, and finally, Sayaka takes one.

As soon as a piece is slipped into her own mouth, Kyouko pockets the box. She tilts her head. "You're able to feel it now, right? When Kitty Cat was drawing her magic back?"

Sayaka nods as she bites down into the cookie. "Y-Yeah..."

Kyouko snaps the stick in half, chewing as she eyes her. "Your enhanced healing... you've noticed it, right? That our bodies can only heal up to a certain point..."

"Y-Yeah..." She closes her eyes.

Though her memories from that time are kind of hazy, she remembers when she had attacked Homura's heart.

She starts, eyes opening, when she feels an arm wrapped around her shoulder. ""...But what's done, is done. You can't fix it. At this point, we can only offer Kitty Cat some band aids."

"Band aids?"

Kyouko holds out a grief seed, before she slips it back into her pocket. "Yeah. Pretty much, this is all we can do for her. So let's find Kitty Cat some band aids, alright? And maybe by the time we get back, Pinky will have calmed down."

Sayaka sighs. "I'm... a horrible person."

"We all make mistakes," Kyouko grunts out as she pushes Sayaka along. "Even someone perfect like me."

She flashes a fanged grin, and Sayaka rolls her eyes.

They continue walking, and Sayaka feels comforted by the weight against her shoulders.

"You said, that you'd start thinking about others," Kyouko says even as she keeps her eyes up ahead. "That we're a team."

She glances over. "Y-Yeah..."

"You know what makes or breaks a team?"

Sayaka blinks. "...Trust?"

Kyouko shakes her head. "Responsibility."

"What...?"

She glances over, to see blue staring at her. "I could trust you all I want, but what the hell would that mean if you don't do what you're supposed to, huh?"

They both stop walking.

Kyouko turns to face her. "It's your fault, that Kitty Cat is like that."

Sayaka flinches, even though those words carry no malice. "Y-Yeah."

"And, we're a team. All of us."

She nods. "Yeah..."

Kyouko jabs a finger to Sayaka's sternum. "You owe Kitty Cat, you understand? You gotta take responsibility for your actions. The other day," she points to her arm, "you remember what you did?"

Her shoulders slump as her hands tighten into fists. "Y-Yeah."

Kyouko flicks her on the forehead, and she winces. "You're slowly paying me back for that; a few more meals, and we're good, alright?"

She rubs her brow. "...Seriously?"

"Yeah." Kyouko shrugs. "Anyways, you owe Kitty Cat. A life for a life, as they say."

She frowns, but remains quiet.

"So, whether or not you're still pining for Pretty Boy, or whether or not you still have unresolved issues with Seaweed Girl," a finger jabs her sternum again, "it doesn't matter right now. Kitty Cat asked us to help her with Walpurgisnacht, and it's probably the only thing she has ever asked of you, and will probably be the only thing she will ever ask you. You understand where I'm going with this?"

She nods. "Yeah."

An arm is thrown over her shoulders, and Kyouko pulls her along once more. They turn the corner, entering the section of the city where the walls are cracked, and the sidewalks are uneven.

"People are counting on you, Slasher." Kyouko points to the ring on her finger. "So you keep that gem of yours clean, and you keep yourself alive, alright?"

She swallows heavily. "Yeah."

Kyouko stops, and eyes her again. "You know what makes a hero, a hero?"

She has a feeling she'll get this one wrong too, but she answers anyways. "…Justice?"

A fanged smirk. "Love and justice, right?" She closes her eyes. "Yeah, I thought that once too."

When those crimson eyes open, her gaze is absent.

"I really thought, you know, that being a magical girl meant that we were being heroes." Her face softens, and the smirk turns into a sad smile. "But, we're the reasons Witches exist, and I realized, I'd never be a hero in my dad's eyes."

Sayaka glances away. "What... then?" she asks quietly. "What makes a hero, a hero?"

Kyouko tilts her head up. "...But you know, there are different kinds of heroes."

She blinks, and turns to face her. "What?"

Kyouko leans in close. "You wanna know the one thing that all heroes have in common?"

A nervous swallow. "...Kindness?"

"Bzzzt. Wrong again." She grins. "Heroes, never give up."

Sayaka feels something pull at her chest as her back straightens.

"Whether it's one, or one hundred people counting on us, heroes," Kyouko smiles, "never let anyone dow**n."**

AN: Let's see... Things will for sure pick up after Tokyo, as in super fast-paced, and then the ending will be there before you know it. Let's hope I can get to it though.

I will be gone for 2 weeks, until September, so if you think it's a little bit quiet and I haven't uploaded anything, it's because I am not at my computer. Don't miss me too much :))) (as if anyone will notice, I say to myself in a small soliloquy)

Anyways, as always, thank you for reading and reviewing! All your encouraging words, and suggestions and everything! Really, thank you! 23 Chapters so far

(including the prologue) and somehow a bunch of you people have stuck with me this far? It feels like a pretty long journey that we've taken together for months now.

Chapter 24: memories

Two bags balanced in her hands, she walks down the street, steps relaxed, yet filled with purpose as she makes her way back to her apartment.

Despite her efforts at keeping her refrigerator well-stocked, Kyouko, with a little bit of help from Homura, seem to turn her efforts into nothing. A small smile of amusement flits across her lips as she thinks of her juniors.

She doesn't mind the extra shopping, at all.

She tilts her head up, golden eyes staring into the sky that's transitioning from clear blue, to colours more fitting for a sunset.

A gust of wind sweeps past, and she brushes her hair back, feeling the chill in the air despite the small barrier of magic kept around her body.

She knows it's a sign of things to come; the increase in Witch activity lately is also no coincidence.

She exhales slowly, before steeling her eyes.

Whatever that is coming, she will be ready.

She straightens her back, and continues on her way.

/

She licks her lips, tasting copper and the tang of salt.

There's pressure against her back, and she grins at the reassurance.

"You alright there, Slasher?" she calls out, turning her head so that her voice carries behind her.

She hears a grunt, and feels Sayaka elbow her in response. "Yeah. You?"

She smirks. "Yeah. Of course—"

They both feel it—the concentration of magic directed straight towards them.

"Move!" she yells even though she doesn't need to.

She sends her body into the air, and a moment later, the area explodes with a shower of concrete and debris.

"Sayaka!" As soon as she lands, she turns around, searching for the other girl.

There's smoke, and though she can feel her blue aura, she can't see her.

A cough to her side, and sudden pressure against her shoulder. "Y-Yeah! I'm fine!"

She sighs in relief, before narrowing her eyes. "I'm getting tired of this! We need to end this already!"

Sayaka shifts, readjusting the grip on her sword. "If you got any plans, I'm all ears!"

Her lips tug into another smirk. Her spear suddenly disconnects, and she's now holding chains in her hands.

"We hit it, until it stops."

The smoke is clearing, and she can see blue eyes flicker her way. "...Why am I not surprised?"

"Follow my lead, Slasher."

She pumps magic into her legs, and takes off towards the Witch screeching ahead of them.

Sayaka sighs even as she swings her sword behind her, destroying the two familiars that have tried to sneak past her defenses.

"You always complain when I rush ahead... but you always do the same..." she grumbles as she starts running to catch up to Kyouko.

\\

It's a familiar sight to her now: Homura, curled around her, her head resting in her lap as she strokes her cat ears.

The sound of soft rumbling from Homura's throat.

As Madoka stares down at that relaxed face, she thinks of how her life has changed so much, in so little time.

Witches, and wishes.

Magical girls.

Her hands pause as her cheeks flush.

...and falling in love.

A whine interrupts her thoughts, and she smiles as she continues her administrations, hands gentle as they continue to brush against Homura's ears.

She sees lavender open briefly to peer up at her, before they once again close.

She wonders when her life had gotten so complicated; she's just an average girl.

But...

She closes her eyes.

Not once does she ever regret meeting Homura, or Mami, or Kyouko.

The purrs from Homura are growing softer, and Madoka opens her eyes to stare at her.

Her breathing is evening out; Homura is once again falling asleep.

She leans down, fingers now trailing down Homura's face. "Homura-chan..."

Ears twitch, and she blinks when lavender is suddenly looking at her, before Homura turns away, towards the door.

The sound as the doorknob twists, and they both hear the creak as the door is pushed open.

Homura slowly sits up. She remains close to Madoka, resting her head against the smaller girl's shoulder as they wait for Mami to appear.

She's smiling when she steps into their view. "I apologize for taking so long; the closer store didn't have the milk I wanted, so I had to head to the one further away."

Madoka shakes her head, smiling when she sees Homura perking at the mention of milk. "N-No, that's okay, Mami-chan! Do you need help?" She moves to stand.

"That's alright. Akemi-chan looks pretty comfortable where she is."

Madoka glances down to Homura, who does indeed look very comfortable.

"Kyouko and Sayaka should be back soon," Mami comments as she heads to the kitchen, bags rustling with each step, "and knowing Kyouko, she'll most likely want something to eat..."

Madoka nods, and watches as Mami disappears into the kitchen, before turning to Homura.

"We need to go home soon, Homura-chan. I already told Papa we'd be late, but..."

Homura presses her head against Madoka's neck. "Okay...the rest of the meeting shouldn't take too long... I don't think." She sits up, and shakes her head, ears flickering. "I'll get things ready."

Homura summons her buckler with a small flash of light. She reaches inside, and a second later, pulls out a projector.

"...Can I help, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, feeling restless just sitting there.

Device now set on the table, Homura blinks in response as she presses the on switch.

A large pendulum appears above them, and Madoka squeaks as it suddenly swings down. She ducks her head as Homura scrambles to shut the function off.

Mami pokes her head out of the kitchen at the sound of Madoka's voice—and her eyes widen at the scene in her living room.

"S-Sorry!" Homura mumbles. There are multiple screens open, and she's trying to find the one that runs the pendulum program. "It's... uhm..."

She doesn't remember how to turn it off.

Madoka sits up when realizes the pendulum is a hologram, and that Homura is starting to panic.

"Homura-chan, let me try?"

Homura turns to her, even as her eyes nervously dart around, still searching. "...O-Okay."

Assuming that Madoka has everything under control, Mami disappears back into the kitchen.

A bit of digging, and Madoka eventually finds the program hidden behind a series of menus.

Homura sighs in relief when the pendulum shuts off, leaving only the opened screens to remain. "T-Thank you, Madoka."

Madoka breathes out her own sigh of relief; she had been worried that she wouldn't be able to figure it out.

"Sure, Homura-chan," she tells her with a small smile. She hands the main screen back to Homura. "Here you go, Homura-chan."

"T-Thank you..." Homura murmurs, concentrated on the offered screen.

Madoka notices that her cheeks are flushed and her ears are flat. She reaches out to place her hand atop Homura's head.

Homura blinks, but briefly closes her eyes when Madoka scratches that one spot by her ear that she really likes. A soft purr is released from her throat, before she reluctantly forces her eyes open, and barely manages to pull away.

"M-Madoka..."

Madoka sighs as she withdraws her hand. She scoots over until she's next to Homura, only to rest her head on her shoulders.

"Don't mind me, Homura-chan."

Homura's ears twitch, and her tail flickers nervously. It takes a bit of effort, but she turns back to the projector.

As her hands start expertly maneuvering screens around, Madoka watches with ongoing curiosity. Pictures are called up, and her gaze lingers at a familiar silhouette, though she doesn't understand why it looks so familiar.

That picture disappears, and Homura continues to draw up more screens, this time ones with maps overlayed with various markers on top. More pictures join those, and Madoka finally recognizes some are of the Eastern port of Mitakihara.

Her brow furrows, and she feels something tugging at her mind.

Concrete, and debris lay at her feet.

Buildings in disarray—

Her eyes widen.

—as Homura fights, surrounded by water.

She draws in a breath, and Homura absently nudges her with her head.

She glances to Homura—but lavender is still focused on her task. Madoka brings her body closer, and concentrates on the pictures that Homura is cycling through.

Something about them makes her head spin, and she closes her eyes.

"...Madoka? Are you alright?"

She opens her eyes, but she finds her vision fuzzy. "Homu...ra-chan...?"

"Madoka? Madoka!"

The last thing she hears is Homura shouting her name, before everything goes black.

/

'*I have things that I want to protect in this world!*'

'*It's okay, Homura-chan, I'll take care of everything*.'

'*Sayaka-chan, and Mami-san, and Kyouko-chan... Homura-chan... none of you deserve this*.'

'*I'll take all your burdens, and I'll create a world where everyone—*'

'*This world is full of so much pain. I must, I need to help, and save everyone—*'

'***This world... is mine***.'

Her eyes snap open as she gasps for air.

Hands are on her, and there's familiar voices calling her name.

She stares above, eyes unseeing as her thoughts are scrambled in her head.

All she can think is that she needs—she needs to save everyone.

Needs to save Homura.

But when she reaches out with her fingertips, she can feel it—life, disappearing with just a single touch.

Indistinguishable faces screaming as she searches for one—

—very—

—specific—

—one.

But—*she's not there*.

Life, continuously disappearing underneath her as she draws them into paradise.

Why?

WHY?

She opens her mouth, tears trailing down her face, and screams.

\

Homura stares at Madoka, her hands wrapped tightly around Madoka's wrists as her body spasms.

She doesn't understand what is happening, and vaguely notices the yellow ribbons as they wrap around the struggling girl.

She had been focused on rearranging all the information on Walpurgisnacht for their meeting—and she knows that Madoka had been watching.

She—

Her grip slackens as her breath hitches.

The ribbons binding Madoka hold strong, but Homura doesn't even notice.

Her ears flatten, and her tail remains lowered to the floor.

Madoka—

Her nightmares, and the previous signs seen of vague recognition.

Madoka—

Homura presses her fingers to her sternum, trying to force her heart to stop pounding; trying to control her ragged breathing.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Madoka—

"Akemi-chan? Akemi-chan!"

Trembling hand still held against her chest, her wide eyes flicker over to Mami, who is staring at her in worry.

"What happened? Why—"

"Mami-san! What's wrong with Madoka? Why is she—"

"Sayaka—"

"What the hell's going on here? Saya—"

"Madoka!"

Homura is trying to stabilize her heart with magic, when she feels hands wrap around her jacket.

"What did you do to her?!"

She weakly tries to push away, but her own vision is swimming black.

She gasps—

\\

She's angry—and all she knows is that Madoka is crying and that Homura is sitting right there.

Her hands grasp her jacket, and she easily lifts the other girl up.

"What did you do to her?!" she demands.

Through her angry haze, she barely notices how pale Homura is, and how she's gasping for breath.

But she ignores it—until Homura is suddenly dead weight in her hands.

She lets go, eyes wide, and watches as Homura drops heavily onto the floor.

"What did you do?!" Kyouko is gripping her shoulder.

"I d-didn't do anything! She just—"

"Akemi-chan? Akemi-chan!"

/

A long corridor.

Walls dark; black.

She is—Akemi Homura.

Long braids, red glasses.

Speech, with a small stutter.

Body, fragile—weak; a burden.

Hands, covered in blood; stained red.

So many failures, with so many timelines.

A small voice, in the back of her head—

...that's slowly growing in volume.

Even if she closes her eyes—

all she sees is, *pink*—

Pink, and red—

And black—

Black—

Black—

Black—

Black—

She coughs, and something prickles in her throat. She falls to her hands and knees.

More coughs, punctuated with crimson dripping from her lips, to the floor.

'You should give up already,' the voice whispers into her ear.

Her eyes close—that sounds like a very good idea.

\\

"Akemi-chan? Akemi-chan?"

A soft whine from her throat as her eyes slowly open.

Black blends into gold, and her eyes struggle to focus.

"Is she alright?"

She recognizes the voices—but she doesn't remember who—which one she's here with.

Is it the Kyouko, who had tried to kill her after she had shot Sayaka?

Is it the Mami, that had confined her when she tried to help her?

She tries to move her head, but finds it so hard to do so.

Her vision isn't clearing, and her heart feels so weak.

She remembers this feeling.

She closes her eyes.

"Hey!"

Something is slapping her awake, and there's rumbling from her throat.

A purr, but this time from discontent.

"You better not fall asleep, Kitty Cat!"

A deeper purr as she tries to curl her body in.

It's too hard, and they merely see the struggle as she tries to move.

"Kyouko, let me."

Mami again.

Is she going to finish her off?

Weakly, she pulls her left hand close to her chest.

She can't—die now.

Madoka—

She forces her eyes open.

"Akemi-chan? Are you alright?"

She vaguely notices golden light next to her; a gentle warmth that barely scratches the surface of cold against her heart. Her heartbeat feels so weak, compared to that second one beating nearby.

Thump.

Thump...

thump—

She struggles to sit up, and all it takes is slight pressure on her shoulder, before she collapses back onto Mami's lap.

"Please, don't move yet, Akemi-chan. I—need to h-heal you."

Her eyes are half closed, and the bit of lavender they can see is concentrated on Mami.

"Ma...?" Only one syllable leaves her lips, followed by a soft whine.

Mami glances down at her, and suddenly realizes what she's asking. "Madoka-chan is alright. She's... sleeping."

Her body relaxes; Madoka is okay.

"Akemi-chan? Akemi-chan, p-please, don't close your eyes."

It's so—cold.

"Akemi-chan!"

Hands once again on her face, before her eyelid is lifted. "Oy! Wake up, you stupid Kitty Cat! You're—a magical girl! You can't just—give up so easily!"

Really? But—she's so tired.

"Sss..." she slurs out.

She just wants to sleep.

"You're healing too slow, Mami!"

"I'm trying! Her magic—"

"Damnit! Sayaka, how's—Pinkie?"

Her ears twitch, and Kyouko immediately whirls on her.

"You hear that, Kitty Cat? Pinkie's waiting for you!"

Her ear twitches again.

Madoka?

The pain in her heart—is still there, but feeling seems to be returning to her fingers.

She concentrates, and her soul gem appears in her curled palm. It's a weak glow of purple—combining with gold.

Magic around her heart, helping to pump blood through her body.

Oxygen being circulated, and she slowly breathes in.

Her vision—is still blurry, and she squints at her soul gem—feeling that it's turning dark—but unable to distinguish black from purple.

A small clink of metal, before the fog is slowly lifted from her mind.

"Just—keep healing, Kitty Cat. We'll take care of this."

She squints at Kyouko—a blur of red, and black, and green—before she nods.

"Tha..."

/

She slams her fist into her leg. "What the hell happened?"

Mami readjusts the blanket covering Homura, before turning to Kyouko. Her golden eyes flicker over to the balcony, and Kyouko grits her teeth.

Mami stands, and Sayaka follows. She glances to Kyouko, who breathes in deeply, trying to control her anger, before she trails after them.

They step outside, and the familiar sight of the orange sky is overhead.

As Mami slides the door closed, Kyouko walks towards the edge of the balcony, gaze distant as she stares to the buildings down below. Sayaka quietly joins her side.

"...And they're supposed to go to Tokyo tomorrow?" Kyouko grunts out, arms now leaning against the railings. "What the hell happened when we were gone, Mami?"

Mami sighs, her own arms crossed below her chest. "...I'm... not sure." She guiltily stares at the floor. "It—there was time, so I went to the market to buy groceries... Things were still fine when I returned. I was in the kitchen, and Akemi-chan was setting something up."

Sayaka leans against the railings, and tilts her head back. "...She's hiding something. Homura, she's—" she shakes her head, "whatever happened with Madoka, she's the reason."

Kyouko grips steel, and Mami cringes when she hears the sound of metal creaking. "Kyouko."

She immediately lets go. "Whoops. I'll uh, pay you back... somehow."

Mami sighs. She glances back, through the clear glass, to the living room.

To where Homura and Madoka are lying on the floor.

Sleeping.

"...Well, we can't do anything until they wake up. Akemi-chan, her heart has stabilized at least, but Madoka-chan... I'm not... sure what caused her to behave like that. It... whatever she saw..."

Kyouko immediate straightens out. "Her machine is still on."

Sayaka pushes off from the wall. "...It is."

Mami is already sliding the door open.

\\

"...Okay, I'll say it. How the hell did she get all this information?" Kyouko asks as she stabs the last piece of her cake. She angrily stuffs it into her mouth as she waits for an answer.

Mami shakes her head. "I-I'm not sure. I've, heard of this Walpurgisnacht, but... to have this much information on such a powerful Witch... It's..."

Sayaka swallows heavily. "T-This is the thing we have to fight? Isn't it kind of, uh..."

Kyouko glances at her. "What? You shaking in your boots, Slasher?"

Sayaka levels her with a glare. "S-Shut up! I'm not—"

"Shhh," Mami murmurs absently as she continues to pull up Homura's files. "This—is amazing... It's..." She looks to Homura, who's still asleep. "...these kinds of numbers, and statistics, it's almost as if, Akemi-chan has faced Walpurgisnacht before..."

Sayaka blinks. "What? Homura has fought this thing already?"

Kyouko swipes a bite from Sayaka's cake, but the other girl is too distracted to notice. "Sounds possible. Maybe," she swipes another piece, "maybe, Kitty Cat, has some kind of agenda against Walpurgisnacht."

It's an offhanded comment, but it sounds entirely too close to the truth.

"Think about it, how much do we know about Kitty Cat, anyways?"

"...She's from Tokyo," Sayaka supplies helpfully.

Kyouko shoves her, and she joins the floor. "H-Hey!"

"I'm being serious here."

Sayaka sits up, eyes glaring. "Yeah? Could've fooled me." She points to the fork in Kyouko's hand, and then gestures to the crumbs sitting on her lips.

"Girls."

Mami's stern voice has them straightening out, and they turn to the blonde almost guiltily.

"Sorry, Mami-san," Sayaka murmurs.

Kyouko grunts. "S'yeah."

"Kyouko brings up a good point though," Mami says as she glances up from the multiple screens. "What—do we know about Akemi-chan? Her magic... what did she wish for? And, why is her magic so different than ours...?"

Sayaka places her hands on her head in frustration. "Ugh, why can't she just wake up, so we can ask her?"

Kyouko shoots her a glare. "You really trying to kill her, or something? You start asking her questions, she's gonna panic, and then her heart's gonna go boom again."

Sayaka's shoulders slump at the reminder.

Kyouko opens her mouth to yell at her—but they all freeze when they see Madoka shift.

Sayaka immediately moves to her side. "Madoka?"

"Mm..." Pink eyes slowly flutter open, only to squint at the lights above. "S-Sayaka...chan...?"

Sayaka throws her arms around her. "You're alright!"

Madoka blinks in surprise. "W-What's wrong, Sayaka-chan? Why—" She tries to sit up, but the ribbons wrapped around her stops her movement. "...W-Why...?"

Mami holds out her hand, and the ribbons disappear a moment later. "It was just a precaution, Madoka-chan."

Madoka stares at her in confusion. "Precaution...?"

Sayaka wipes the tears from her eyes, before finally pulling away. "You... Homura—"

"Homura-ch—" Madoka's eyes widen when she sees Homura lying on the floor. "Homura-chan! W-What's—what happened?!"

Sayaka tries to control her jealousy when Madoka pushes away from her to move to Homura's side.

"...We're not sure, Madoka-chan," Mami answers quietly. "We were hoping you could tell us."

Madoka places one hand to Homura's forehead, frowning at her pale pallor. "W-What do you mean?" she asks as she looks up.

Mami shakes her head. "Something... happened to you, Madoka-chan. We think it may be related to this." She holds out a screen for her to see.

They notice how Madoka immediately stiffens. She sucks in a breath, and averts her eyes, hands now shaking as they rest on Homura's forehead.

"Madoka?"

'***This world is mine***—'

She freezes.

"I'm not—I-I don't know," she whispers softly.

"Madoka-chan? Please, any little thing that you remember, will help."

"I don't—"

'***Mine***—'

She slaps her hands against her ears, curling her head in. "NO! I w-wouldn't—"

'***If I destroy everything—then***—'

"Madoka?"

"Madoka-chan!"

"I WOULDN'T! I W—"

"Madoka! What's wrong!"

"I—wouldn't," she sobs out, burying her face into Homura's chest. "I—only—wanted—"

Sayaka tries to place her hands on Madoka's shoulders, and flinches when Madoka slaps her away.

"D-Don't touch me," Madoka whispers as she grips her own arms tightly. "I'll—I'll end up—I'll—"

"Madoka-chan, please, calm down."

Her eyes are dilated, and she bites down hard enough on her lips to make them bleed. "I-I'm—a-monst—"

She blinks at the stinging pain on her cheek. She slowly turns her head.

Weak hands are gripping her shoulders, and Homura is staring at her with tears in her eyes. "You're n-not," she whispers. "You're not—that's n-not..."

"H-Homura...-chan?"

Homura collapses against her. "You're not—y-you're kind, a-and s-selfless, a-and you're..." she coughs, "y-you're—" more coughs.

Warmth across her shirt, and the smell of something metallic in the air.

She glances down, and dark black now stains her jacket front. A chill runs down her back. "Homura-chan!"

"Y-You're-not—"

"S-Stop it! Stop talking!"

"Y-Y—"

Madoka grabs her tightly. "Stop it! Stop it, Homura-chan!"

A pale hand weakly grasps her shirt, thin fingers continuing to smear black on fabric. "Y—"

"Shhh, stop it, Homura-chan. Stop, please." She rocks Homura back and forth, trying to comfort her, and trying to calm down at the same time. "Stop it, please," she pleads. She presses her lips against Homura's head. "Shhh. I'm—I'm okay, Homura-chan. I'm okay, so please..."

Homura gently nudges her with her head.

"R-Release your magic, Homura-chan."

A small rumble from her throat, and she responds by kissing the side of Homura's head again.

"Please, Homura-chan. I-I'm okay. I'm okay, and y-you, you need to be okay too. P-Please..."

A click, and Sayaka immediately stumbles forward. "Mado—whoa!"

"Mado—Akemi-chan?"

"Mami-chan! H-Homura-chan's—"

Mami's eyes widen when she notices the blood. "Akemi-chan!"

She quickly moves over, hands already glowing before she even places them in front of Homura's chest.

Mouth pressed into a thin line, golden eyes briefly flicker over to Madoka, before she turns back to her task.

/

"...I will drop by tomorrow, Madoka-chan, before you two head off to Tokyo. Kyouko and I will try our best to gather as many grief seeds as possible tonight."

Madoka merely nods as she keeps one arm looped around Homura's waist.

"Will you be alright carrying her inside?" Mami asks softly.

"I-I should be okay," Madoka murmurs, pressing her head against Homura, who's struggling to keep her eyes open.

Mami sighs. "...There are things we definitely need to discuss, when you two return," she says, voice still soft.

Madoka nods once more, and there's acceptance in Homura's eyes as lavender looks her way.

Mami steps back, and takes a moment to evaluate their appearance. Madoka—her face is withdrawn, and Mami can tell that whatever had happened—is still bothering her. She's wearing one of Mami's jackets, and the oversized fabric only serves to make her small form seem even smaller.

And Homura—her ears and tail have appeared once more; a clear sign of her exhaustion.

Mami lifts her hand, but immediately drops it back to her side. She's—worried of what will happen in Tokyo.

But—

The only thing she can do is provide Homura with grief seeds.

"If that's all, Mami-chan...?" Madoka murmurs.

"Yes. I will—I'll send you a message in the morning. I will also drop off your bags tomorrow."

"Okay, thank you, Mami-chan..."

Mami watches as Madoka starts walking towards her house, movements slow as she's all but carrying Homura's weight.

Mami leans forward, wanting to help, but hesitance once more has her body rocking back.

Madoka whispers something to Homura, and a moment later, her ears and tail disappear. One last glance behind her, and Madoka offers Mami a smile that's a mere ghost of her usual exuberance, before they're disappearing through the front door.

"...Think they'll be okay?"

Mami jumps at the voice next to her ear. She turns to find Kyouko standing besides her, hands tucked into her jacket pockets.

"K-Kyouko... Sayaka is already at home?"

Kyouko pulls out a box of pocky. "Yeah. Figured I'd just meet up with you here."

She offers Mami a stick, and the blonde blinks, before she pulls out a piece.

She nibbles at it politely as Kyouko snaps a stick in half.

"Y'ready?" Kyouko asks, mouth full.

Mami merely summons her soul gem into her hand. "Yes."

Kyouko nods. "After you."

\\

As expected, Tomohisa is in the kitchen when they step through to the living room.

"Maroka!" Takkun brightens when he sees them, but his brow furrows when he sees Homura with her eyes closed. "Kitty?"

Madoka keeps her gaze on the floor. "We're just going to head to bed, Papa," she says softly. She barely manages to give Takkun a small smile. "Takkun, we'll play later, okay? Kitty's a bit tired at the moment..."

Takkun's eyes dart to Madoka, and then to Homura, before turning back. "Okay..."

"Madoka."

Madoka hears footsteps, and finally lifts her head just as a set of arms wrap her and Homura close.

"Whatever it is, Papa's here, okay?" he whispers as he holds them tightly.

The familiar smell of rice, mixed with baby powder, and a hint of cologne.

Madoka blinks back the tears, and smiles when she feels something hugging her leg.

"Maroka."

"Y-Yea—" she cuts herself off as she closes her eyes.

/

"Thanks, Papa," Madoka murmurs as she watches him lower Homura to the bed; she's completely passed out.

"Of course, Madoka," he replies.

Takkun grips his dad's leg, and peeks out from behind it. "Kitty's sleeping?"

Madoka nods.

He hesitantly pulls away from Tomohisa to step closer to Homura. "No more bad dreams for Kitty," he murmurs as he leans close to Homura's sleeping figure.

Madoka smiles when she sees how gentle Takkun is as he kisses Homura's forehead, before his small hands reach to pet her head.

"Don't hesitate to call me if you need anything," Tomohisa says as he draws Madoka in close once more for a hug.

She buries her face into her dad's chest. "Okay, Papa. Thank you."

He leans down, and kisses the top of her head. He waits until Madoka lets go, before moving away."Come on, Takkun. Let's let Madoka and Homura-chan sleep."

Takkun nods, and withdraws his hand. He turns around, and before Madoka can react, he launches himself at her. She barely manages to keep her balance as he tackles her legs.

"Maroka," he says as he hugs her tightly.

She smiles, and returns the hug. "Thank you, Takkun. I needed that."

He nods, and lets go. Tomohisa holds out his hand, and Takkun walks over to take it.

Tomohisa offers Madoka another kind smile. "Mama will be home later than yesterday, but work starts later tomorrow. We'll have breakfast together before you two head off to the station."

Madoka nods. "Okay, Papa. Thank you."

"Say goodnight, Takkun."

"Goodnight," Takkun replies as he follows his dad to the door.

"Goodnight, Papa, Takkun."

"Goodnight, Madoka."

One last glance, and Takkun's bright smile is the last thing she sees, before the door clicks shut after them.

Madoka remains in place as she slowly lowers her head.

Her shoulders slump, and she swipes her hands across her cheeks to brush the tears away.

"Ma—"

She turns around, and Homura is gripping the blankets, face now scrunched in pain as she dreams whatever she always dreams.

Madoka quickly strides over, dropping to the bed once she's close enough.

She places her hand on Homura's forehead, trying to ease those worry lines away. "Shh, Homura-chan. I'm right here. Shhh."

A low rumble from Homura's throat, and her cat ears appear a moment later.

Her fingers are still pressed into the blankets, and worried that she's going to aggravate her heart again, Madoka crawls into bed to slip her arms around the still sleeping girl.

"Shhh, Homura-chan," she whispers into her ear. "I'm right here. I'm right here."

Homura turns towards her voice, and buries her face into Madoka's neck, even as the low rumble continues from her throat.

"Shhh." Her lips tremble, and she closes her eyes as tears fall. "Y-You're," she chokes back a sob, and her arms tighten around Homura. "Y-You're not okay," she whispers.

Homura doesn't reply, still asleep.

"M-Maybe," Madoka continues, "maybe I'm not okay e-either..."

\

Her eyes are drooping, and she's close to falling asleep when there's scratching heard from the window.

She blinks heavily, vaguely realizing the lights are still on as she turns her head.

More scratching, and she struggles to sit up.

Homura is still holding her tightly, arms wrapped around her waist, head now lying in her lap.

"Ho—" she clears her throat, "Homura-chan. Homura-chan? I need to let—" she winces as Amy paws at the glass impatiently, "Homura-chan?"

A small whine, but Homura's eyes remain closed.

Madoka sighs. She spends the next minute maneuvering over to the window as a Homura sized weight continues to hold onto her.

When she's finally able to slide the window open, Amy immediately jumps inside, meowing loudly in protest.

"I know," Madoka says as she closes the window, "but Homura-chan..."

"Meow." Amy headbutts Homura's head in greeting, and Homura merely buries her face against Madoka's lap.

"Mm..." Madoka blinks, finding it hard to keep her eyes open.

She glances down, and realizes that she's still in her uniform. Homura is also still wearing hers, and she decides that their clothes are already wrinkled enough that it doesn't really matter.

The light is still on though, and Homura's ears are exposed; if her parents walked in, they would definitely see.

Amy is nudging Homura's face, eliciting a whine as she continues to sleep.

Madoka tries to pull Homura off her, but her hold remains steadfast.

She sighs once more.

As if understanding, Amy redoubles her efforts and licks Homura's cheek. "Meow," she says as she paws Homura's face.

"Nn..."

"Meow. Meow."

Madoka's still trying to figure out how to remove Homura, if only temporarily, and blinks when she sees lavender peering at her.

"...Ma...doka...?"

She places her hand on Homura's head, and gently scratches her ears. "I need to turn off the lights, Homura-chan..."

"Meow."

Homura turns to glare at Amy.

"Meow."

Madoka already knows what's going to happen, and reaches over with her other hand to pet Amy. "Shhh, Amy. It's okay. Thank you."

Homura is eying Amy, and Madoka trails her hand down, until it's against Homura's cheek.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura turns to her.

"The lights..."

Homura blushes, and finally lets go. "S-Sorry..."

"Be right back."

Madoka wavers on her feet when she stands, but she manages to turn off the lights without further complications.

Once that's done and her eyes have readjusted, she strides back into bed, where Homura automatically reattaches herself against her side.

Amy licks Madoka's cheek, before she hops away to sleep in her own bed.

Too tired to think anymore, Madoka wraps her arms around Homura, and closes her eyes.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan," she murmurs.

"...G-Goodnight, Madoka."

/

She wakes with a stifled scream.

Heart beating loudly, breaths now coming out in gasps.

Tears trailing down her face as she remembers—

"M-Madoka?"

She pulls away as hands reach for her, and almost tumbles off the bed in her haste.

Homura immediately draws back, the fear felt from Madoka hurting her more than the pain she feels against her healing heart.

Madoka swallows heavily, throat and mouth dry. "H—" she clears her throat, "Homura-chan...?"

Her eyes are readjusting to the darkness, and she can barely see the other figure sitting on the bed.

"A-Are..." Homura's quiet voice trails off.

"I'm..." Another memory hits her, and she presses her palms into her eyes. "I'm..." She leans forward, body curling in. "I'm... I'm... w-what... what am I...?"

Silence is her answer, and the tears continue to fall.

"Meow." A weight against her leg, and something that feels like dry sandpaper against her skin. "Meow."

She wraps her arms around that warmth, hugging Amy close.

"Meow."

"...B-But—"

"Meow."

Homura slowly crawls over, and stops when she's in front of Madoka. Her hands hover, the fear of rejection once again keeping her from reaching out.

Amy hisses, and Homura flinches in response.

Hesitantly, she lowers her hands, and tentatively rests them on Madoka's shoulders. "M-Madoka...?"

Madoka throws herself against Homura, burying her face in her chest. "H-Homura-chan," she sobs out. "I'm—" she chokes down her words.

Homura wraps her arms around her. "Y-You're Madoka," she whispers. "Y-You're K-Kaname Madoka, my f-first friend." She runs her hands through Madoka's hair. "A kind, s-selfless girl, who puts her friends a-and family, before h-herself."

"Meow."

"I-I'm—"

Homura hugs her tighter. "Y-You're Kaname Madoka," she repeats. "T-That's—N-No matter what, y-you're Kaname Madoka."

She continues to cry as Homura holds her close.

Eventually, Homura realizes that Madoka has fallen asleep.

"Meow." Amy headbutts the side of her head.

"...I know."

"Meow." A gentle nuzzle, before Amy settles into the pillows, lying down right besides Homura.

She remains awake, hands continuing to rub Madoka's back as the other girl sleeps.

Tokyo, tomorrow.

But at this moment, her mother's funeral is the least of her worries.

Her time is running out—and Madoka remembers.

She finds it hard to swallow the lump in her throat. Revealing her past always had repercussions, and she had been hoping that it would happen later, not sooner.

Her hands are shaking, and she quickly tries to calm her fears.

A deep inhale, followed by a slow exhale.

She concentrates on the warmth lying on top of her, memorizing it, letting the feeling burn into her mind.

If this is one of the last times she's able to hold Madoka, then she wants to remember it as clearly as possible.

She closes her eyes, hands pressing into Madoka's back.

Familiar.

War**m.**

AN: Ahh. Many things happenedddd in this chapter, and I can safely say that the first draft didn't look like this, so long ago... Well... gotta figure out what happens next ! Another month? Maybe 3 weeks, depending on my schedule, as I've other things and other stories to work on too...

Thank you again for all your comments, and encouraging words! Really, I never expected this story to go on for so long... I've hit crazy milestones with wordcounts, and this is definitely the longest I've worked on something *celebrates* I really hope to finish, though at the rate I'm going, it might end up being at the end of the year...? Well, we'll see. I also need some heavy edits to do... as my writing has considerably changed since the beginning.

Thank you again for reading/reviewing! :))) If any of you have specific questions, you can shoot me (pewpeww) a PM or msg me on a certain website, as I am more likely to answer those :) Replies may be slow though! Sorry! But thank you again for reading/reviewing!

Chapter 25: truth

She groans, wrapping her arms around her head to muffle the sounds.

She doesn't want to go to school today.

The alarm continues relentlessly, and she hears a familiar whine next to her ear. She feels pressure against her neck, before another low grumble is heard.

She sighs, and forces her eyes open. There's light peeking through the curtains, and she blinks a few times, and waits for her eyes to readjust. With another groan, she moves over to turn off the alarm. Even with Homura attached to her, she eventually leans close enough to tap the button to disable the sound.

There's a faint hum in her ears as the alarm shuts off, and she remains sprawled across the bed, still not willing to fully wake up.

A few minutes pass, before she sits up in panic when she realizes she hadn't done her homework last night. Just as she's about to pry Homura off her, she catches sight of their rumpled clothes—and finally remembers that today is Friday.

That they have no school today, because they're going to Tokyo.

Tokyo.

There's a nagging thought in her mind, and she frowns as she tries to remember. Her eyes widen: they had forgotten to pack.

She quickly shakes Homura awake. "Homura-chan. Homura-chan?"

Homura whines, her ears flattening as she tries to bury her face into Madoka's chest.

"I need to pack, Homura-chan. You can—sleep, I'll pack for us, but can you let go, Homura-chan?"

Homura grumbles, but does as told, and once she's free, Madoka scoots off the bed.

/

"Good morning, Sayaka-san."

Sayaka holds out an arm in greeting. "Morning, Hitomi."

Hitomi starts walking, and Sayaka matches her pace. The air is still heavy between them, and Sayaka nervously grips her school bag as they continue in silence.

Hitomi glances at her briefly, before she sets her gaze straight ahead. "...Madoka-san, and Akemi-san should be leaving to Tokyo soon."

Sayaka nods. "Y-Yeah. The train ride will take a few hours supposedly..."

Hitomi absently tucks stray strands of hair behind her ear. "Close to three hours, actually. Or longer, depending on which train they're taking."

Sayaka looks at her. "Ahhh, that's right, you went there for uhm, your recital last year." She gives a strained smile, lifting her hand to place it behind her head. "Guess I'm the only that hasn't been there; just you wait, though, I'll definitely visit one day!"

Hitomi closes her eyes. "Yes, I am sure you will have the opportunity to visit sometime in the near future..." Her eyes open. "Sayaka-san."

Sayaka sighs; she knew this was coming, and yet—

Hitomi stops walking and turns to face her, and Sayaka does the same.

"About Kamijou-kun—"

"I'm not going to confess," Sayaka blurts out.

Hitomi sucks in a breath. "W-What? Why—"

"I give up—on him—for you." Sayaka shakes her head. "I mean—you… can date him, Hitomi. I give up on Kyousuke."

Hitomi's hands bunch into fists, and her eyebrows are drawn as she glares at Sayaka. "*Why* would you—" She cuts herself off, and takes a deep breath to calm down. "…I will only accept your words if you give me a good reason."

Sayaka glances around, noting the curious looks they're gaining because they're standing in the middle of a busy road.

"Sayaka-san."

When she turns back to face Hitomi, she's surprised to see her eyes are almost shining with unshed tears.

She straightens up, matching Hitomi's intense stare with her own. "It—wouldn't work out between me and Kyousuke."

Hitomi opens her mouth, but Sayaka barrels forward.

"I have—other things that are important to me. I have… things to do—that take priority over him. He—has his music, and I have my own things to worry about." She grips her bag tightly. "…It wouldn't be fair to him, or to you, for me to confess when I have no expectations of becoming his girlfriend."

Hitomi glances to the floor, her brow furrowed as she processes Sayaka's words. "Can I ask what it is?"

"It's…" Sayaka's voice trails off.

"…Does this involve Madoka-san and Akemi-san somehow?"

Sayaka averts her eyes. "Uh, no, why would you think that?" She clears her throat as she raises her eyes once more. "This is—something I resolved to do on my own, for myself, by myself."

Hitomi slowly lifts her chin. "…Very well. If this is what you have decided, then I can only accept. Thank you for being truthful with me, Sayaka-san." She bows, and Sayaka immediately holds her hands out.

"Uh, there's no need for that, Hitomi! I'm just… I'm sorry, I wasn't able to give you a clearer answer earlier…"

Hitomi shakes her head. "No, it's understandable. I apologize for antagonizing you, and demanding an answer before you had time to process what was happening. I—" she stares at Sayaka, her eyes boring into hers, "…are you positive that this is what you want to do, Sayaka-san?"

Sayaka can picture it in her mind—Hitomi, and Kyousuke, walking side by side. Laughing, and sitting together during lunch. Walking home together, and—

She clamps down on that anger, on that darkness that threatens to cloud her soul gem. She can now admit that yes, her wish had been selfish, and she wants nothing more than to tell Kyousuke—to tell Hitomi the truth. But—

She's a magical girl now; just another faceless hero.

Hitomi can go home after school, not having to worry about things lurking around the the corner. Kyousuke can play his violin, his only worry to be about his next recital.

And even if Hitomi and Kyousuke are together, it doesn't mean that she's alone.

More than those gentle brown eyes in her head, she can see sharp crimson, and golden yellow staring at her.

She nods, feeling empty, yet somehow relieved. "Yeah. I—" She takes in a deep breath, before exhaling, "I wish you and Kyousuke the best of luck, Hitomi."

"I..." Hitomi stares at her, her eyes still shining, "...thank you, Sayaka-san."

\\

All packed, and hair still damp from their quick showers, Madoka and Homura are now dressed for the day and sitting at the kitchen table.

Despite having no appetite, Madoka bites into her toast as an excuse to not talk. She's too mentally exhausted to carry a conversation, and Homura is more or less half asleep as her eyes have closed twice now as she sips at her milk. Luckily, Junko mistakes the atmosphere to be because of their impending trip to Tokyo, and she and Tomohisa, with occasional words from Takkun, fill in the gaps of silence from the two girls.

They take their time eating, and Madoka eventually feels her spirits lifting; she even manages to crack a smile at her mother's joke.

Once breakfast is finished, and after a quick check of their things, they start heading towards the car.

"Meow."

Homura stops walking as she feels a weight on her shoulder.

"Meow." Amy headbutts her, and she reaches up to pet her on the head.

"...I don't think it'll keep though," she murmurs.

"Meow."

"I'll see." Homura scratches behind Amy's ear. "Be good, okay?"

"Meow."

Junko and Tomohisa share a smile. Takkun continues pushing their luggage forward, and they follow him out the door.

"Take care of them, okay?" Homura tells Amy.

"Meow."

"I'll be fine. I'm more worried about you."

"Meow."

Homura sighs.

Madoka reaches over and lifts Amy from her shoulders. "We'll be back soon, Amy," she says as she hugs Amy close.

Amy purrs in response, rubbing her head against her, before she squeezes out from Madoka's arms, and jumps to the floor.

"Meow."

Homura scowls, but Amy is already trotting away towards Madoka's room.

Madoka sighs this time, and gently pats Homura's head. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

Homura turns to her, and her whine turns into a purr when Madoka scratches her lightly where her ears should be.

"O-Okay," she murmurs.

Madoka nods and takes her hand, pulling her along as they walk to the entrance.

/

They're minutes away from leaving the house when Madoka notices two figures approaching the driveway in the rear view mirror.

She turns to the girl sleeping against her shoulder. "Homura-chan..." She gently runs her fingers through the other girl's hair.

Lavender slowly opens to blink at her confusion.

"Mami-chan and Kyouko-chan are here. I'll be right back." Madoka turns to Takkun who is sitting in his car seat. "You stay with Kitty, okay, Takkun?"

"'Kay," he replies, briefly glancing up from his projector screen to acknowledge her.

Homura reluctantly pulls away to let Madoka exit the car. Mami is greeting Junko and Tomohisa, exchanging polite words when Madoka walks over.

"We'll go drop these off and make sure the doors are locked," Junko says as she drags Tomohisa with her.

Mami bows to them once more, before she smiles at Madoka. "Madoka-chan. How are you feeling?"

"Mm, I'm okay..." She shrugs. "Homura-chan is sleeping in the car."

Mami nods. She holds out the bundle in her hands. "I packed a bentou for you two to eat on your way there. I also included some snacks, in case it's not enough." She tilts her head, and Madoka glances down.

"Thank you, Mami-chan," she murmurs as she accepts it.

"Of course. Kyouko helped as well."

Madoka turns to the silent Kyouko standing behind Mami. "Thank you, Kyouko-chan."

Stick of pocky in her mouth, Kyouko shrugs. "S'yeah. Don't go eating everything all at once though." She raises her eyebrow, and Madoka knows she's implying more than said.

She nods. "Yes, we'll... try and limit how much we eat. Thank you again."

Mami is nervously twisting her hands, and Kyouko nudges her with her elbow, prompting her to finally step forward.

It's a whiff of flowery perfume, before arms hold Madoka tightly.

"Please, stay safe," Mami tells her. "Both you, and Akemi-chan, okay, Madoka-chan?"

With one hand holding the bentou, Madoka hugs Mami with the other. "...Thank you, Mami-chan."

Mami pulls away, only to place her hands on Madoka's shoulders. "Don't hesitate to contact us for whatever reason. Just say the word, and one of us will be on the earliest train there."

Madoka nods. "I... Thank you, Mami-chan..."

Mami steps back. "Of course."

"Madoka, are you girls about done?"

They turn to face Junko who walks over to slip her arm around Madoka's shoulder.

"Yes, Mama." Madoka holds out the bentou in her hands. "Mami-chan and Kyouko-chan made us a bentou as well."

Junko smiles. "You two will have plenty to eat on the way there then. Thank you girls for going out of your way, and for dropping off their bags. Are you sure you're all right missing school?" she asks, eying Mami's uniform.

Mami smooths down her skirt. "Ah, I already received permission from my homeroom teacher. He knows I will be absent from my morning classes."

Junko nods in approval. "Responsible as well as considerate." She glances to Kyouko, noting her casual clothes.

Mami clears her throat. "Kyouko is in the middle of transferring to the school; she hasn't started yet."

Kyouko scowls to herself, eyes concentrated to the side.

"Ah." Junko squeezes Madoka's arm. "Well, we should be going. I would offer you two a ride, but..."

Mami holds out her hands. "That's alright, Kaname-san. We'll be fine walking."

"Kaname-san is what they call my parents," Junko replies with a wink. "Junko is fine. I'll have to treat you girls to dinner when Madoka and Homura get back." Mami's eyes widen, and is about to protest when Junko gestures to the bentou that Madoka is holding, "as a thank you, for that, and for coming to visit even though you didn't have to."

Mami bows her head, flushing lightly. "I-It's no trouble at all."

Junko waves her off. "I'll have Madoka get in touch with you two later and we'll plan something out. It was nice seeing you again, Mami-chan." She glances to Kyouko. "And, Kyouko-chan, was it?"

Kyouko has her hands stuffed in her jacket pockets, and she hunches in her shoulders. "...Yeah."

"It was nice meeting you, Kyouko-chan. Thank you two again."

"Thank you," Madoka echoes.

Junko leads Madoka to the car, and she gives them a small wave over her shoulder.

Kyouko follows Mami to the street, and they wait, watching as Junko's car backs out from the driveway. The car stops as Junko waves to them through the window, and Mami bows once more.

Moments later, the Kaname family and Homura are disappearing around the corner.

Kyouko pulls out a familiar red box. "Think they'll be okay?"

Mami sighs. "I hope so."

Kyouko shakes the box at her, offering her a stick. She glances at it briefly, before she reaches over.

/

"Now, remember to call me when you two arrive," Junko tells her as she places her hands on the side Madoka's face.

"Okay, Mama. I will."

Junko turns to Homura who's trying to stifle a yawn against her hand. "Homura."

She blinks and lifts her head.

Junko pulls Homura in for a hug, squishing her against Madoka. "You two, be careful okay?" She kisses the top of their heads. "We'll be waiting for you to come back."

Madoka blinks back the sudden tears, her own arms tightening around her mom. "Okay, Mama."

Junko holds them for another minute, before she finally lets go.

"Madoka." Tomohisa holds out his free arm, Takkun mimicking him as his dad carries him.

Madoka gives her dad a teary smile as she accepts his hug, and her smile widens when Takkun pats her on the head. She moves away, and they all turn to Homura who is still standing in front of Junko.

Takkun waves his arm at her. "Kittyyy."

Junko gently pushes her forward.

"Have a safe trip, Homura-chan," Tomohisa tells her.

She glances to the floor. "T-Thank you..." She blinks when she feels someone rubbing her head.

"No more bad dreams for Kitty," Takkun chants out.

"...Thank you, Takkun."

The chime rings from the speakers, signaling the arrival of the train.

Junko gives them both another hug, keeping her arms around them as they wait to board.

"Have a safe trip," Junko tells them once the outgoing passengers have exited.

Madoka nods, one hand holding Homura's, while the other holds their lone suitcase.

"Don't forget to call when you arrive!"

"I wont, Mama. We'll see you later. Bye!"

They step inside, and after giving her family one last wave, Madoka leads Homura further in, until she spots their reserved seats. She helps Homura store their luggage into the overhead compartment, and just as they place their bags down, the train chimes once more, signalling their departure.

Still standing, Madoka can see her family on the platform, waiting for the train to leave. She watches them for a moment: Tomohisa is still carrying Takkun as Junko stands right beside them.

She feels a tug on her jacket, prompting her to turn around.

"You should sit down, Madoka," Homura murmurs.

She blinks, and there's a jolt as the train pulls forward. She's thrown off balance, but before she pitches forward, there's another tug on her jacket, and she ends up falling back. Arms are around her waist, and she tilts her head to look behind her.

"Are you alright, Madoka...?"

She remains sitting in Homura's lap, enjoying the warmth from their contact. She closes her eyes, listening as the train slowly picks up in speed as it continues to travel down the tracks.

"Madoka...?"

"Yeah," she whispers. "I'm—okay. Thank you, Homura-chan."

\\

An hour into their ride, and the constant thrum of the moving train is slowly lulling her to sleep. Homura is leaning against her shoulder, and she's resting her head against hers.

She doesn't know what to expect in Tokyo—but the further they travel, the more she's looking forward to it.

Tokyo—is unknown to her. Other than a short trip that she barely remembers when she was around Takkun's age, she knows nothing else of it besides what she has seen in pictures and heard on the news.

If she walks the streets, closing her eyes won't make her remember ruins and broken buildings. She won't remember the view from above as everyone below cowers in fear.

She—

She swallows heavily, forcing her whimper back down.

"Madoka...?"

She turns her head to find Homura staring at her, brows furrowed in worry.

"Are you alright?"

She turns, pressing her face against Homura's shoulder. "I'm-I'm okay..."

Homura moves her hand, grasping Madoka's in her own. "I'm here," she murmurs.

Madoka feels her lips tremble, and she places her free hand against her eyes to stop from crying.

Homura—is here, for now.

But—how long until she's not?

/

Mami glances to the stairs, having long since sensed Sayaka's pending arrival. She is surprised to see her by herself however, and continues to eat her lunch as she waits for Sayaka to join them.

"Yo," Kyouko calls out to her, mouth full.

Sayaka takes a seat, and remains quiet for another minute as she stares down at her unopened bentou.

"Sayaka?" Mami lowers her chopsticks.

"...Hitomi went to talk with Kyousuke," she says softly.

"With Pretty Boy? They hooking up?"

Mami shoots Kyouko a glare, who responds by stuffing another omelette into her mouth.

Sayaka sighs. "I—told her that it was fine—t-that I'm okay with them... dating."

"...Are you really, Sayaka?" Mami stares at her, looking for the telltale signs.

They see Sayaka grip her bentou tightly, before she slowly relaxes. "Y-Yeah. I'm, uh, fine." She quickly slaps her cheeks. "I'm fine," she repeats as she plasters a smile on her face.

Kyouko taps her on the head with her knuckles. "Geez, no one's telling you to push yourself. If you're sad, then be sad. It's better than that sorry excuse you have for a smile."

The smile disappears. "Y-Yeah..."

"So, since you're so sad, that means I can have your lunch, right?"

Mami sighs in exasperation as Sayaka slaps Kyouko's hand away.

She turns around to face her, and her response dies on her lips. "...Whoa."

Kyouko glances away, lightly flushing and suddenly self conscious. "W-What?"

Sayaka gestures, and her bentou almost falls from her lap. She catches it, before she holds out one hand to Kyouko, pointing at her.

"Y-You're—"

"Mami insisted," Kyouko growls, "since Seaweed girl made such a big deal last time. If I had known she wouldn't be here, I wouldn't have bothered!"

Sayaka grins. "You look... almost normal."

Kyouko glares as she tugs on her skirt. "And what does that mean?"

Sayaka turns back to her lunch, feeling better now for some reason. "Guess you clean up nicely, *street rat*."

"You—!" Kyouko lunges at her, but Mami holds out her hand, and Kyouko barely manages to duck before she runs into it. "Hey!"

"It is nice seeing you wear different clothes, Kyouko," Mami agrees. "Maybe we should go shopping, and get you some new outfits."

Kyouko immediately backs away. "What—"

"Bet you'd look nice in something pink and frilly," Sayaka tells her, still grinning.

Kyouko scowls, and turns back to her own bentou. "We got better things to do than to go shopping. Does a giant, deadly Witch touching down in about a week or so ring a bell?"

"As if anyone could forget," Sayaka shoots back.

"Well, there's not much we can do, except to patrol, and to go over those notes that Akemi-chan left us. Those two won't be back until Tuesday..." Mami trails off, frowning lightly in worry.

"...What do you think about that stuff, anyways?" Sayaka asks in between bites. "I tried looking it over last night, but there's a bunch of numbers and stuff that I don't get."

She hears Kyouko scoff.

"What, don't tell me *you* understood it?"

Kyouko sticks out her tongue, showing her bits of chewed food.

"Kyouko," Mami warns.

Kyouko swallows her food, before she replies. "Kitty Cat pretty much just gave us a bunch of statistics and calculations. Like where Walpurgisnacht'll appear, or whatever."

Mami nods, staring into her bentou as she recalls Homura's notes. "Some are easy enough to understand. Some, however... unfortunately, without her explanations, we'll have to figure it out on our own, or wait for her to tell us when they return..."

Sayaka sighs. "Figures that her notes are just as cryptic as their owner. What do you think happened with Madoka, anyways? D-Did she seem okay, when you saw her this morning? I messaged her, but..."

"Considering her emotional state yesterday... she seemed stable," Mami gently replies.

Sayaka bows her head. "I should've gone..."

Mami places a hand on her shoulder. "...Madoka-chan will come around. She's not the type to stay angry."

Sayaka sighs. "Y-Yeah..."

"As for what had happened," Mami tilts her head up, gaze cast to the sky, "...we won't know until they return. I have a few theories, and a few suspicions, but... whatever it is, it's... probably tied to Akemi-chan."

"Homura, huh..." Sayaka pokes at her rice. "Everything always goes back to her... Everything about her is so suspicious..."

Kyouko lowers her now empty bentou onto the bench. "Don't know; don't really care."

Sayaka frowns. "What—"

Kyouko shrugs. "If Kitty Cat wanted to, she probably could've offed us whenever. Have you seen her move? Yeah, maybe she's weak as hell, but all she has to do is use her speed and bam!" She smacks her fist into her open hand. "We'd be gone before you could even blink. So what, she's got an agenda with Walpurgisnacht? Anybody who does probably has a pretty good damn reason; I mean, the stories you hear about that Witch leveling cities as she breezes past... who wouldn't have an agenda against her?"

"But—"

Kyouko points at Sayaka. "Maybe you got an agenda with Kitty Cat. You ever think of that?"

"W-What?"

Mami narrows her eyes. "Kyouko."

Kyouko shakes her head. "Whatever." She moves to stand. "Thanks for lunch, Mami. I'm gonna head out now. I want to get out of these clothes and it's easier to sneak out when there's students by the front." She turns to Sayaka. "Remember what I told you. It still hasn't changed, and whatever Kitty Cat's reason is, it still doesn't matter. You'll get no sympathy points from Pinkie if you end up losing, by the way."

Mami sighs. "Kyouko."

"See you." Kyouko holds out an arm as she walks away.

Sayaka slumps over. "Geez, she's not one to pull punches, is she?"

"No, not really..." Mami looks towards the stairs, and barely catches sight of red before it disappears. "...She wasn't always like that though."

Sayaka glances over. "Mami-san... Can I ask you something?"

"Go right ahead, Sayaka."

"...What's—your reason for hanging on? H-How do you fight through everything, every day? How... do you stay strong?"

Mami stares at her bentou, mulling over her words.

She sighs, already knowing her answer. "...Because, I'm a coward."

Sayaka blinks in confusion. "W-What? You're—the strongest magical girl here! You're—"

Mami smiles sadly. "My wish—was a selfish one. Even if I was under duress... my first thought was that 'I don't want to die.' I'm not sure how things would've gone if I had saved my parents; maybe they would've succumbed to death in a different way, considering the nature of wishes..."

She shakes her head.

"...But even now, every night that I'm out there, fighting for my life... All I can think is that 'I don't want to die.' There are... many, many things I still want to do." She glances up. "...Before I met you girls, I was debating whether or not to continue onto high school. It'll be difficult to maintain my grades as I study for exams and patrol. I heard that it's also mandatory to join a club as well... it would just be a lot easier for me to carry on my duties as a magical girl without having to worry about school."

She turns to smile at Sayaka.

"But, I realize now, that if I give up that opportunity, I won't be able to gain it back. 'I don't want to die,' does not just mean that I don't want to die; it means that I want to live, and I want to experience all that life can give me. Yes, every day that I fight, I'm afraid that I won't walk out of that barrier alive. But if I walk in, unafraid, it means I have given up; I'm afraid because I don't want to die. Because I have things outside, waiting for me."

She reaches over and takes Sayaka's hand.

"We fight, because we want to live. There will always be doubt inside your heart, Sayaka. And anger, and pain. Lonely nights, where you'll think to yourself 'why me?' Nights where you'll wonder if it's easier to just give in; to walk into a barrier, and never walk back out. But I'm a coward, Sayaka, and that's what's keeping me alive."

"Mami-san..."

Mami lets go to wipe her eyes. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

Sayaka shakes her head. "I'm... a coward too, Mami-san. I... maybe we can be cowards, together."

Mami laughs softly. "Kyouko probably wouldn't like that nickname very much."

Sayaka frowns. "She's not..."

"We're all running away from things, Sayaka. I think—that's really what it means to make a wish... Only those willing to run away from reality are granted wishes."

Sayaka lowers her eyes. "Y-Yeah," she murmurs. "...Then, what's Homura running from?"

"That," Mami shakes her head, "I have no idea."

\\

She drifts in and out of sleep, several times her own voice waking her as she barely manages to suppress her screams. Each time though, Homura is there, holding her close, murmuring into her ear.

After another restless nap, she forces herself awake, leaning against Homura's shoulder as she tries to ignore the voices in her head.

"Are you hungry?" Homura asks softly.

She lifts her head. "...A little."

Homura nods, and reaches for the bentou that Mami had packed for them. The grief seeds that had been inside are already safely tucked away, and it's the simple task of unwrapping the cloth, before popping open the lid. It's a colourful assortment of foods, and Homura feels her own stomach growl as she sees the grilled fish that Mami had included.

She hands Madoka a pair of chopsticks.

"Thank you, Homura-chan." She sits up. "It looks good. We'll have to thank Mami-chan again..."

Homura nods even as her own chopsticks are heading towards the fish.

Between the two of them, they manage to finish everything in no time, and Homura leaves the chopsticks inside as she rewraps the bentou to set it aside.

Stomach full, Madoka leans back against her seat. The food had served as a distraction, and had provided a little bit of comfort; she feels better.

She turns, and smiles when she sees Homura using the back of her hand to rub her mouth. "Homura-chan."

Homura freezes, and pulls her hand back before she can lick it. She frowns; that had been completely involuntarily.

Before she can say anything though, Madoka is leaning over, and a moment later, there's a cloth against her mouth. Once she's sure that Homura's clean, Madoka settles back into her seat.

"...The hotel is really close to the station," Madoka murmurs as she repockets her handkerchief.

Face slightly flushed, Homura glances out the window. "T-That's good. It'll be easier to navigate around the city..."

Madoka closes her eyes. "...Where does your aunt live, Homura-chan?"

"Closer to downtown."

"That's not too far away, is it...?"

Homura shakes her head, before she realizes that Madoka has her eyes closed. "No. It's only half an hour from the station."

"...Mm..."

Homura glances over, noticing that Madoka is starting to fall asleep again. She takes her hand, squeezing it lightly.

She'll be ready.

\\

Madoka wakes once more, but it's not because of another vision dancing in her mind. She blinks sleepily, eyes half closed as she watches Homura purchase three milk boxes from the cart vendor. She knows that Homura had restrained from buying everything, and once the cart is pushed forward, Madoka reaches over to pat Homura on the head.

Homura holds out one of the boxes to her.

"Thank you, Homura-chan," she says, accepting it as she sits up.

"We'll be in Tokyo in half an hour or so," Homura mumbles as she keeps her eyes down, concentrating on poking the straw through the container.

Madoka nods as she does the same. She takes a sip, letting the familiar taste of the strawberry milk wash over her tongue. Before she's even halfway done with hers, she once again hears the sound of empty air from Homura's straw, and smiles to herself.

"I'm going to go use the restroom, Madoka," Homura says as she places the empty boxes aside.

"Okay."

She hears rustling, and turns her head to see Homura digging something out from her side bag. There's a flash of red, before whatever it is is slipped into Homura's jacket. She blinks, but Homura is standing, and then stepping past her.

"Be right back," Homura murmurs as she heads to the back of the train.

Madoka finishes her drink, and is listening to the dull thunk of metal as the train continues when Homura returns. She moves her legs to allow Homura through, and freezes when she sees a familiar pair of glasses perched on Homura's face.

"*I'm—A-Akemi, Homura. N-Nice to meet you."*

"I—people don't call me by my first name very often—because it's so strange..."

"It's a cool name, Homura-chan! You just have to become cool, too!"

There's a hand on her arm, and she gasps as she's pulled from her memories.

"Are you alright, Madoka?"

Instead of answering, she reaches forward, until her hand is cupping Homura's cheek. She stares at those familiar glasses; at that familiar lavender gaze behind them.

She can see it clearly: a shy, timid Homura with her long hair tied in braids.

She blinks, and the tears from her eyes fall down.

"Homura-chan... You..." Her words catch in her throat, and she blinks once more.

Homura glances around nervously, before she grabs Madoka's hand, pulling it down to rest in her lap. "...I usually use my magic to offset my nearsightedness. I want to lessen the amount of magic my body is using to lower our chances of being tracked by another magical girl."

Madoka nods, her eyes closing as she hears an echo in her head—Homura's voice, quieter, and with a constant stammer.

She opens her eyes. "What about your heart...?" Her eyes flicker down briefly, glancing at Homura's grey shirt that's covering that jagged scar underneath.

"...I should be fine."

Her eyes narrow as she lifts her gaze, and Homura flinches.

"...I'm using more magic to supplement it... the little bit that should be going to my eyes..."

Madoka nods, and settles back against her seat. A second later, she sits up.

"I should use the restroom..." she murmurs as she moves to stand.

/

She stares blankly past the tracks, one hand looped around their suitcase as she waits for Madoka to finish talking with her mother.

She vaguely remembers coming here, how long ago, waiting on the platform that sits across from them. It had been winter then, and each breath had been accentuated with a puff of white air.

It's spring now, though the air still chills her throat.

Her eyes wander, and she sees the signs flashing across. They remind her that they're in Tokyo, where she has lived for most of her life.

Tokyo—the city that holds no meaning to her anymore.

"Okay, Mama. I know. Yes, we're going to head to the hotel now. Uh huh..."

Homura glances over when Madoka takes her hand.

"Okay. Okay... alright. Love you too. Okay..." Madoka holds out the phone to Homura, who hesitates before she accepts it.

"Hello...?"

"Like I told Madoka, don't hesitate to buy whatever you want, okay? I gave her access to my credit line; spoil yourself when you're there."

"...O-Okay, thank you, Junko-san."

"Mmhmm. I need to get back to work now, but, take care of yourself, okay, Homura? You and Madoka."

"O-Okay..."

She hears Junko sigh softly. "We'll be waiting for you two to come back."

"...Okay."

"I'll talk to you two later."

"...Okay. Bye Junko-san, thank you again..."

There's a click on the line, and Homura lowers the phone. She hands it over to Madoka, who takes it, and slips it away into her pocket.

"Now," Madoka says as she turns to her, "time find our hotel."

Homura nods as she reaches for their suitcase, but Madoka snags it before she can.

"I have it, Homura-chan," she says as she starts leading them down the platform.

Homura blinks, but knows better than to argue, and merely follows her.

/

After asking one of the workers at the station, they're pointed to the direction of where they can hail a taxi. The station itself is bustling with commuters, and the unfamiliar sights has Madoka's eyes wandering; if they have time later, maybe they could explore...

"Homura-chan," she turns to the other girl, and finds Homura staring at one of the many vending machines located inside. She already knows what Homura is looking at, and gently tugs her towards the machine. "Which one did you want, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances at her, before she ducks her head, and points to the top left drink.

Madoka resists shaking her head; of course Homura would want strawberry.

She keys the amount wanted, before she scans her phone along the scanner. There's a small rumble heard as the drinks fall, and when Madoka looks over, she smiles when she sees Homura watching the machine eagerly.

A beep, signaling it's done, and Homura dives towards the chute. She pulls out five milk boxes, looking absolutely ecstatic as she straightens up.

"Let's sit over there," Madoka nods towards an empty bench.

"Okay..."

It doesn't take long for Homura to finish her milk, and Madoka quickly tugs her along as two kids sitting nearby continue to stare at Homura in awe.

"We'll get more, later," Madoka murmurs as she searches the signs, looking for the exit.

"Okay..."

\

It's not too hard to find a vacant taxi, and after their luggage is stored, Madoka tells the driver their destination. It's entered into the GPS, before the driver heads towards their hotel.

Madoka leans back against her seat, her eyes staring out the window. She glances over to Homura, wondering how she feels now that she's back; Homura's face gives nothing away.

She sighs softly as her eyes close. They immediately open again when something flashes through her mind, and she tries to swallow the lump in her throat.

Homura presses her hand against hers, and she squeezes back.

The hotel isn't too far from the station, and luckily for them, the driver remains quiet, letting the murmurs from the radio fill in the background noise. They pull up to the entrance soon enough. The driver opens the door, and they step outside. There's a light clatter as their suitcase is pulled out from the trunk, and Madoka hands him her phone once he places it down.

"Thank you," he says as he withdraws the correct amount.

Madoka nods. She's given back her phone, and they're both making their way to the entrance when the taxi drives away.

Hand still gripping Homura's, Madoka pulls her forward as the doors automatically open, and they enter.

There's a small line at the counter, and Madoka nervously glances around when she notices a few of the other guests looking their way, no doubt wondering where their parents are; they are the youngest ones inside.

As soon as it's their turn, Madoka takes a deep breath, before she steps up to the concierge counter.

"Hi, uhm, I have a reservation, for uhm, Kaname Madoka...?"

The woman nods. "Ah, you must be the daughter of Kaname Junko?"

Madoka blinks. "Yes. How did you...?"

The woman smiles. "Your mother already phoned ahead, saying that you would be checking in soon. All the paperwork has already been taken care of, but I'll still need you to sign in before I give you your keycards."

"O-Okay..."

It's a brief process, and after signing the needed papers, the attendant hands them a small envelop holding their keycards.

"Complimentary breakfast starts at 7am, and ends around 9:30am. The curfew for minors in this area begins at 10pm on weekdays, 11pm on weekends. Will you need help bringing your luggage up?"

Madoka shakes her head. "N-No. Uhm, w-we're okay..."

"The elevators are to your left. If you need anything, please feel free to call the front desk. We hope you enjoy your stay."

The woman bows, and Madoka bows in response. "T-Thank you," she murmurs.

One more polite bow, before Madoka steps away as Homura quietly follows after her.

Madoka double checks their room number. She pockets the envelope. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

"Okay..."

/

Their hotel room is a spacious room located on the fifth floor. There's a small balcony on the outside, with a view of a small park below that's nestled in between random shops. She squints, and recognizes one of the larger signs; she makes a mental note to maybe go there later for milk.

She turns, and does a quick check of their room.

In the middle is a single, King sized bed; most likely because she had told her mom about Homura's nightmares. The door to the bath is to the right, and straight across the bed is a small desk that sits right below the flat screen TV. To their left, and right by the entrance is a mini bar with a small refrigerator tucked inside the cabinets, and a microwave in the corner. Their shoes are by the door, and their bags are sitting in a small pile on top of the dining table in front of the mini bar.

Her gaze returns to the bed, where Homura is sitting on the edge with her head bowed.

Madoka watches her for a moment, before she finally steps closer, her feet taking her across the carpet floor.

And even though the window is opened, and she can see the curtains fluttering from the breeze, the air inside is stifling; almost suffocating.

She takes a deep breath, eyes still concentrated on that slim figure sitting on the bed.

"...Homura-chan."

Homura flinches, her shoulders bunching in as her hands press into her knees.

"I..." Madoka finally stops a few steps in front of her. She swallows, and finds that lump is still there. "...Can you tell me now?" she asks quietly.

Homura curls her body forward, already knowing what she's referring to.

"...Yes," she mumbles. She lifts her head slightly, enough so that she can peer at Madoka who's still standing. "I... t-there was this—" her voice cuts off, and Madoka sees that her cat ears have appeared, now flat against her head. "...You were my first friend," Homura whispers. "I—was, I didn't fit in, w-when I transferred to Mitakihara. I-I couldn't answer a-any of the questions, a-and I couldn't participate in gym. I-I couldn't do anything..."

Madoka remains standing, watching as Homura's shoulders slowly shake.

"I was—t-there was a Witch," she continues, her voice hitching lightly, "a-and, you—you saved me." Homura hiccups, her hands smacking into her glasses as she forgets they're there. She tries again, this time lifting the frames as her hands brush away her tears. "Y-You were—amazing. I—wanted to be just like you..."

She swipes at her eyes once more.

"B-But, W-Walpurgisnacht came, a-and Tomoe-san h-had just died. I—wanted—" she bows her head, barely managing to bite back her sob, "I-I still couldn't make my w-wish. I-I was—a coward—w-who couldn't h-help you. Y-You went off—on your own—a-and you won. B-But-you had *died*."

Homura lifts her head, her teary eyes staring at Madoka who's—just watching her.

"...I made a wish," Homura whispers, "to save you. I—redid everything, all over again. I t-thought that, if... if I was there, then y-you wouldn't have died... t-that we could've defeated Walpurgisnacht together..."

Madoka can feel memories passing through her mind.

"...but it didn't work," Homura says softly. "S-So I went back. A-And I tried again. A-And again. A-And again..."

"Homura-chan..."

"I tried—everything I could. I—promised you, t-that I wouldn't let you be tricked by Kyuubey. T-That you wouldn't fall for the same trap." She grits her teeth, her tears falling freely as she bows her head. "B-But no matter what I did—I c-couldn't win."

Madoka finally steps forward to take a seat right next to her. The bed dips as her weight is added, and she places one arm around Homura's shoulder.

"...Why didn't you tell us? We could've—"

"I did!" Homura shouts, her eyes closed as she presses her fingers into her legs. "I t-told you-*every time*! B-But t-the longer I continued, t-the further we drifted away!" She angrily swipes at her eyes, this time knocking the glasses from her face and they tumble to the floor. Homura ignores them, turning her head away. "I told you—e-every time... b-but... you—stopped believing me, too," she whispers.

Madoka leans over, until her head is resting against Homura's. "...I'm so sorry, Homura-chan."

"I couldn't tell you, b-because I was afraid you wouldn't believe me." Homura turns to face her. "D-Do you believe me, Madoka?" she asks, voice small.

Madoka blinks, her own vision blurring at the tears in her eyes. Homura's story explained *so* much—that she realizes that she's afraid.

"Madoka...?"

She sucks in a breath—knowing that it's not just her who's afraid—but Homura as well.

She nods, and uses her jacket sleeve to wipe at her eyes. "I believe you, Homura-chan."

"Y-You do?"

She dabs at her eyes, before she lowers her arm to stare at Homura.

Homura—who's looking at her like her world rests solely on her shoulders. Who's waiting for those words—that will either make, or break her.

She nods again, her one hand reaching out to cup Homura's face. "I believe you, Homura-chan," she says softly.

Homura shoots forward with a loud wail, her arms wrapping around Madoka as they both fall back on the bed. Madoka stares past the white ceiling, her eyes seeing blue skies, and then murky grey ones.

Homura remains crying against her chest, and finally, she raises her own arms, encircling them around the trembling girl.

"Shhh, it's okay, Homura-chan," she murmurs, her hand stroking her ears. "It's-" her eyes continue searching above, "it's okay..." she breathes out.

She doesn't know how much time has passed, just that her eyes burn, and that her shirt is now soaked.

"Homura-chan...?"

Homura lifts her head.

"I..." she places her hand against her eyes. "...Then, I'm...? W-Who am I...?"

"K-Kaname Madoka," Homura answers softly. "Y-You're Kaname Madoka."

"But, all those people..."

Her hand is forced away, and a teary faced Homura is now above her. "T-That's not you! S-She's—not you! You're... you're Kaname Madoka."

"I'm...?"

Homura bows her head. "I'm sorry," she sobs out. "I-It's all my fault."

Madoka focuses her eyes on Homura.

"I... c-couldn't save you. N-No matter how hard I tried, i-it was always me, being saved by you..." Homura blinks, and a tear drops to Madoka's cheek. "...K-Kriemhild Gretchen... is the Witch of Salvation... her e-existence is my fault, because I'm not strong enough to save you..."

Madoka lifts her hand, using her fingers to wipe the tears from Homura's eyes. "...It's not your fault, Homura-chan."

"I-It is!" She pulls away from Madoka. "I r-realize it now—why your potential—w-why your power continues to grow... Every reset makes you s-stronger... I-I'm the reason... i-if only I could've made a w-wish... back then..."

Madoka slowly sits up. She leans forward once more, her arms wrapping around Homura. "It's not your fault, Homura-chan," she repeats. "You... just wanted to save me..."

Homura turns to her, burying her face in Madoka's neck. "M-Madoka? Y-You believe me, right?"

"I do, Homura-chan."

"T-Then, you know that you can't make a wish anymore."

She freezes at Homura's words.

Homura pulls back, lavender searching her eyes. "Y-You told me, that you have people in this world t-that you want to protect. Y-Your mom, a-and your dad. T-Takkun... If... if Kriemhild G-Gretchen appears again..."

Madoka swallows heavily, trying to mute the voices crying in her head. She knows what will happen—even with her eyes open, she can see it all so very clearly.

"So," Homura gently reaches for her hands. She holds them, and Madoka feels her stomach drop when Homura smiles at her, "t-this time, I'll protect you, for sure. E-Everyone's w-working together, a-and we're—we'll be strong enough, to defeat Walpurgisnacht without you."

She grips Homura's hands tightly. "Homura—"

The tears trickle from Homura's eyes, and Madoka blinks when she realizes that she's crying as well.

"Madoka. I'd—" Homura pauses, trying to find her voice, "...you know I'd repeat a-as many timelines as possible for you. T-That I'd go through e-everything just to save you... b-but my time's running out."

Eyes wide, Madoka shakes her head. "N-No, Homura-chan! Y-You—"

Homura moves their hands, until they're resting against her chest. "...Kyuubey wasn't lying when he said t-that my heart is failing. I... probably need another operation... m-maybe even another heart."

Madoka sits up on her knees, leaning forward. "T-Then we'll get you another heart! Y-You can't—"

Homura's still smiling as she shakes her head "...It t-takes time to qualify for a transplant. Years, if I'm lucky..."

"Y-Your magic—"

"It's... not practical. The amount of grief seeds—"

Madoka tears her hands from her grasp, only to throw herself forward on top of Homura. "W-We'll get as many grief seeds as you need, Homura-chan! Y-You can't just —"

"It's okay, Madoka. I'll s-save you, for sure."

Madoka buries her face in Homura's chest. "N-No, H-Homura-chan... y-you—"

Homura holds her close. "I-I'll definitely protect you, if it's the last thing I do."

Madoka closes her eyes, fighting to keep her lips from quivering, to keep from releasing whatever it is that's building deep in her chest. She swallows heavily, and finds *that lump is still there*.

Homura continues to whisper reassurances into her ear, and she responds by pressing her fingers into her back, unwilling to let her g**o.**

AN: Again, another month updateee. I'll try to be quicker with the next one, maybeeee.

Thanks again for reading/reviewing! whew.

Chapter 26: believe

She absently twirls the spear in her hand, letting it loop around palm, and then over the back of her hand.

The barrier is fading, and she stifles another yawn as she waits for it to completely vanish.

Another rotation, but this time she grips her spear briefly, before flicking up her wrist to toss it into the air. As it continues spinning, she forces her magic away, leaving a trail of red flecks to rain down as her outfit and spear disappear.

Mami is now in front of her, a small smile on her lips as she had seen her acrobatic work. There's a flash of yellow as her magic is released, and a second later, she's in her school uniform.

She holds out the new grief seed, but when Kyouko shrugs, it's merely slipped into her skirt pocket.

"This stuff is dropping like candy," Kyouko comments as she pulls out a box of pocky from her jacket.

Mami nods. She casts a quick look around the alleyway; dimly lit and empty. "Even if we're going after the familiars before they can hatch into Witches... we are finding an alarming number of grief seeds. I believe the ratio has significantly increased in the last few days..."

Kyouko chomps down, feeling a bit of her anxiety leave as the chocolate hits her tongue. She holds out the box, and Mami hesitates, before she reaches for one.

"...They've gotten stronger too," Kyouko adds in between bites. Her eyes flickers to the side when she hears a rustle in the corner. "...Think it's because of Walpurgisnacht?"

She sees the end of a thin tail, and moves for another stick as Mami nibbles hers politely.

They both listen to more scrapes and scratches, the noises somehow reminding them of a certain cat eared magical girl.

"...Most likely," Mami says once she has swallowed both her smile and her snack.

Kyouko shoves another stick of pocky into her mouth. "Dwou thwink—we'll be ready...?"

Pulling out her handkerchief, Mami gives Kyouko a side glance. "Truthfully... I'm not sure. At this point, you and I are bearing most of the weight; Akemi-chan is..." she lowers her eyes as she absently wipes off her fingers, "...recovering." She slips the cloth back into her pocket, and turns to face Kyouko. "Sayaka is improving... but, the opportunity for the four of us to fight together has been rather limited..."

"Yeah..."

"...Not to mention, it—" Mami shakes her head, "...it's the aftermath that I also fear. We... might even have an unlimited supply at the moment, but considering there's four of us... how long will that supply be sustainable?"

Neither of them say it, that there's a possibility that four will become—

Kyouko nods. "Yeah. And considering how fast we're blasting through them..." She sighs, her fingers once again reaching for her pocky.

She frowns, and lifts the box to eye level, one eye closing to peer inside.

The packet is already empty.

She groans in response.

"We'll drop by the convenience store afterwards," Mami tells her as she holds out her soul gem.

"Ah..." Kyouko pockets the box. "Uh," she scratches her cheek, "...thanks."

Mami smiles. "Of course."

/

She wakes to cobwebs and disorientation; are her dreams her reality? Who is she; which is she; where is she?

She blinks heavily, before drawing her hands close to her face in confusion.

Her vision is fuzzy, and her eyes cross as she tries to focus on the lines on her palm.

"H-Homura-chan...? Homura-chan!"

She sits up abruptly; she recognizes that voice.

A brief glance to her side, and the day finally comes crashing down: Tokyo. Her confession. *Madoka*.

"Madoka...? Madoka!" She reaches over to shake her awake, but meets resistance as she's roughly shoved to the side. She tries again, and this time she finds an elbow smashed into her cheek from Madoka's thrashing.

She ignores the pain and throws herself on top of her, using what little weight she has to hold her down.

"M-Madoka!"

Finally, wide eyes open, and Homura sighs in relief when she feels her still.

"Ho...mura-chan...?"

"I'm—right here, Madoka," she murmurs as she moves off her.

"I..."

Homura wraps her arms around the other girl as she starts crying.

"I-It's okay," she tells her, nuzzling Madoka's cheek. "I-It'll be okay..."

As Homura continues to hold her, her reassuring words slowly transition into purrs as she tries to calm Madoka down. Eventually, the sobs turn into lighter sniffles, and Madoka sighs into Homura's neck, feeling exhausted even though they had just napped.

She lifts her head only to see that Homura's eyes are closed.

"...Homura-chan?"

"Hmm...?" Lavender opens to blink at her sleepily.

"...Nothing. I—was just checking to see if you're awake..." She rubs at her eyes with her hands. "I'm... going to go wash up," she murmurs.

"Okay..."

Madoka gives her one last hug, before she sits up, and moves to scoot off the bed.

Homura remains lying there, staring at the ceiling as she hears the bathroom door close.

She wouldn't mind going back to sleep. She ignores that thought, and with much reluctance, pulls herself up.

After a quick shake of her head to clear the rest of the cobwebs, she looks around in confusion, once again wondering why things seemed off. Absently, she licks the back of her hand. Just as she's about to rub it against her cheek, she catches herself and sets her hand back down.

A glance to the bathroom door, and there's a small bit of relief when she sees it's still closed. She moves to the edge of the bed, where it finally dawns on her that she's missing her glasses.

It takes a bit of searching, before she's slipping the now unfamiliar weight on her face.

Her eyes focus on the digital clock on the night stand, and it informs her that it's evening; they had slept for about two hours.

She absently licks her hand again. She freezes, tongue still sticking out when she hears the door open.

Mid-step, Madoka pauses, blinking at the sight. Homura quickly drops her hand as she feels her cheeks warming. She quickly moves to the bathroom, avoiding Madoka's knowing gaze as she walks past.

When she steps back out, the lights have been turned on, and Madoka is digging through their suitcase.

"...Did you need a new shirt too, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, not looking up as she continues her search.

Homura glances down to her wrinkled shirt, and then to the darkened spot by her left shoulder. "Yes please..." She moves over to join her.

Hearing her footsteps, Madoka turns to face her, holding out a black shirt. "Will this be okay?"

"That's fine... Thank you." Homura takes it, before heading back into the bathroom to change.

When she's done, she steps out, only to squeak when she sees Madoka changing by the bed. She ducks back into the bathroom as Madoka finishes pulling her hoodie on.

"...Homura-chan? I'm done."

Red-faced, Homura appears from the doorway, arms hugging her discarded shirt as her ears lay flat. "I-I'm sorry..." she tells her, not meeting her eyes.

Madoka shakes her head. "...We've bathed together, Homura-chan... Many times, I'm assuming..."

Homura glances away, still blushing.

"Mm," Madoka turns and walks to their bags, giving Homura space to calm down. "...What should we do about dinner, Homura-chan? We still have the bentou that Papa packed us."

"A-Anything is fine..." Homura tells her as she gingerly takes a seat on the bed. She lays the shirt next to her, letting it air dry.

In front of their bags, Madoka starts rooting around for the bentou in question. "...There's a convenience store down the street. We should buy some snacks and drinks."

Unconsciously, Homura's tail thumps the mattress.

The sound has Madoka glancing over, and she takes a moment to evaluate Homura's twitching ears.

"Let me check how much Papa packed us, and then we'll go."

Homura immediately perks up and she's off the bed in another second. "O-Okay."

Madoka finds and pulls out the small package her father had packed. After double checking the contents inside, she turns to see Homura waiting by the door, shoes already on.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura looks up as her tail continuously flickers around behind her.

The sight makes Madoka crack a smile. "Before we go outside, Homura-chan, there's something I need you to do..."

Homura's ears flatten. "W-What?"

Madoka approaches her, and once she's close enough, she reaches up to scratch Homura's ears. "...You need to put your ears and tail away."

Homura flushes, and Madoka places her hands on Homura's face. She grins and squishes her cheeks.

"Did you not notice them?" she teases.

Homura tries to shake her head, but finds it hard to do so with Madoka holding her face. "N-No..."

"Mm..." Madoka watches as Homura's ears disappear. "Maybe, we can get you a hat..."

Homura blinks. "Why?"

"It'll be hard to hide your tail, but a hat can at least cover your ears." Madoka lets go, only to slide one hand down to take Homura's hand. "Maybe one of the shops nearby will sell something."

Homura blinks again, but Madoka is reaching for the keycard on the table, and then slipping it into her pocket.

"Let's head out and walk around a bit."

"O-Okay..."

\\

Evening, and the chilled air sends goosebumps to run along their exposed skin. Rather than head back in for a warmer jacket, Madoka merely presses closer to Homura, who responds by flushing in embarrassment.

She doesn't pull away however, and that has Madoka smiling as they continue to walk.

There's a good amount of people around, and they join the small crowds browsing the stores nearby. They past a few souvenir shops, and duck into one when Madoka spots a rack of hats by the entrance.

Her eyes zeroes on a pink newsboys cap, and she's reaching for it a second later.

Homura obediently stands there, letting Madoka place it on her head.

"Hmmm." Madoka steps back, and nods in approval when she sees that it's a bit oversized.

"Madoka...?"

"It's cute." Madoka points at the mirror attached to the top of the rack. "What do you think, Homura-chan?"

Homura tilts her head. Before she can view her reflection, the hat slips, and covers half of her vision.

She frowns, and lifts it up with her hand. "...About?"

"I'm going to buy it. Is there anything else you want, Homura-chan?"

The cap is pulled off, and Homura blinks at her. "N-No...?"

Madoka nods and takes Homura's hand once more. Homura passes the cap over, and they walk to the register to make their purchase.

/

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

Homura tilts her head, and the cap moves with her. She brushes it back into place. "Uhm, t-thank you, for buying me the hat..."

Madoka nods. "It fits you, Homura-chan."

The cap slips again, and Homura reaches up to push it back. "It's... kind of large, though...?"

"Yes. So that your ears will fit under there."

Homura blinks. "But... my ears are usually hidden."

Madoka taps the brim of the hat, and Homura sighs when it slips again. "Yes, but recently you've been having trouble controlling them, haven't you?"

"Uhm..." Homura guiltily glances away.

"If you leave your ears out, will it be easier for you to keep your tail hidden?"

Homura tilts her head, causing the cap to once more tip forward. She readjusts it. "M-Maybe...? I'm... not sure. I have never tried, actually..."

Madoka quickly glances around; no one is paying them any attention.

"Try it out, Homura-chan."

"Uhm... T-Try what...?"

"Summon your ears, but keep your tail hidden."

"Oh..."

She has to concentrate, as they usually appeared together. Her ears easily fit under her new cap, and to her relief, they stop it from slipping forward.

"How is it?" Madoka asks, watching her curiously.

Homura blinks. She gently shakes her head, and the cap remains in place. "It's okay."

"And your tail?"

"Uhm... it's... strange, not having them both out... but... it seems better than keeping everything hidden."

Madoka nods and takes Homura's hand. "Okay. Let's head to the convenience store and buy some snacks."

Homura immediately brightens. "O-Okay."

Madoka bumps her leg with her hip. "Keep your tail hidden, okay?"

"O-Okay..."

\\

She deliberately keeps a tight hold on Homura, and they browse the snack aisle even though she knows Homura wants to run to the back, to where the milk can be found.

Finally, after they choose a few packages of sweets and chips, Madoka lets Homura lead her to the refrigerator section. Homura looks absolutely ecstatic at the selection, and Madoka leaves her with the basket to take a look at the food nearby.

She decides on a twin pack of strawberry sandwiches, and turns back to ask Homura what she wants.

It's then that she realizes there's people whispering around them, and that Homura has emptied out most of the milk on the shelves. The basket is filled to the brim, and to her amusement, Homura's also carrying as many as she can in her arms.

Calmly, Madoka walks over. "Homura-chan?"

Homura turns to her with wide eyes, but Madoka merely smiles.

"Did you grab some for me too?" she asks as she eyes the large pile; they're all small boxes of flavoured milk.

Homura blinks. She glances down, and then back up. "Y-Yes...?"

Madoka nods, ignoring that obvious question mark. "Okay." She stares at the boxes that seem to want to spill out of Homura's arms. "...Let me get a basket too, and we'll pick out some more food and then head back, okay?"

"O-Okay."

"Be right back."

/

She knows there's something about courtesy and manners and leaving something for others, but she finds that she could care less.

Homura is happy—beaming really, at her hoard of milk boxes, and Madoka is more than glad to accommodate her.

The cashier stares, slack-jawed at the baskets as they place them on the counter, but Madoka remains smiling, and he finally starts scanning the large pile.

They're both weighed down by numerous bags as they exit, and she ignores the looks and whispers as they step outside.

She turns to Homura, who seems about ready to start drinking the milk right then and there.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura looks over, and Madoka can already picture her ears lying flat across her head.

"Are you okay carrying that many bags?"

Homura quickly nods, holding them close enough that Madoka knows she won't give them up.

"...Wait until we get to the hotel, okay?"

Homura lowers her eyes. "...O-Okay..."

Though the concierge does a double take as they walk past, no one says anything as they head to the elevators.

It's a quick trip up, but Homura is impatiently tapping her shoes as they ride the elevator to their floor.

She rushes outside once the doors open, and Madoka follows at a slower pace. When she reaches their hotel room, she finds Homura staring at the doors, as if willing them to open with her eyes.

She places her bags to the ground to search her pockets for the keycard. Once she finds it, she glances to the side, and Homura is now burning a hole into the bags she's carrying.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura looks up.

The door clicks, and Madoka pushes it open.

Homura darts inside, her bags rustling along with her.

As Madoka stoops to retrieve her bags, she hears a squeak, followed by what sounds like twenty or so boxes of milk tumbling out onto the floor.

She barely manages to hold back her laugh, and schools her face into a stern frown as she steps inside. After she closes and locks the door, she places her bags down.

Homura is still scrambling to pick everything up when Madoka clears her throat.

She ducks her head. "I-It—t-the bag ripped—it's..." She lowers her head even more. "I-I'm sorry..."

Madoka crouches to hug Homura close. "It's okay. I'm not angry," she tells her as she removes Homura's hat.

As expected, her ears are flat against her head.

Madoka scratches them. "Homura-chan?"

"Y-Yes...?"

"I'm a bit thirsty. How 'bout you?"

Homura's ears perk up, before they're suddenly flattening again. "I'm... okay."

Madoka rubs the top of Homura's head, effectively messing up her bangs in the process. "It's not good to lie, Homura-chan."

Homura glances up, meeting her eyes, before they move to the side to where the bags are. "...C-Can I drink them all?"

Madoka pinches her cheek. "You know that's too much milk for you, Homura-chan."

She tries to protest, but Madoka holds up a hand.

"You're always scolding Amy about eating too many snacks. This is the same concept, Homura-chan."

Homura whines, and Madoka immediately pokes her cheek.

"You already drank five boxes at the station. Did you already forget?"

Homura averts her eyes. "But..."

"We'll split the bentou, and for now, you can drink as many as you usually do during lunch."

"I-I drink around t—"

"I know you only drink six boxes, Homura-chan."

Her mouth remains open, before she shuts it close with a small pout.

Madoka places her hands on the side of Homura's face and squishes her cheeks. "And no pouting. You look adorable, but it's not going to change my mind." She lets go. "Help me put everything into the refrigerator."

"...O-Okay."

\\

Madoka watches, amused, as Homura continues to drink her milk without stopping. Despite setting aside 6 boxes for Homura to pair with dinner, the refrigerator isn't wide enough to fit everything they had purchased. Six had turned into eleven, and Homura had practically glowed at the news.

There's the hollow bubbling sound, and Homura immediately pulls the empty carton away. As she's reaching for the next one, she blinks, and finally notices Madoka watching her.

"M-Madoka...?"

"Hm...?"

Homura pokes the straw through, before she offers the box to her.

The gesture makes Madoka smile. "Are you sure you want to give me one, Homura-chan? I could just buy something else. There's a vending machine on this floor somewhere. You said you wanted to drink them all, didn't you?"

Homura quickly shakes her head. "Y-You can have some. I d-don't mind... sharing with you."

"...Are you sure?"

Homura nods, her face flushing lightly. "Y-Yes..."

"Thank you, Homura-chan."

She bobs her head, handing it over, before quickly reaching for another one. She keeps her eyes down as she sets the straw, deliberately avoiding looking at Madoka. When she briefly glances up, she finds Madoka still watching her. She ducks her head once more, her eyes immediately turning back to the milk box in her hands.

"Homura-chan?"

Her ears twitch as she glances back up.

"You haven't touched your bentou."

"Ah..." She eyes the food, and Madoka already knows Homura's trying to think of an excuse not to eat.

"Homura-chan."

Her tail flickers, and she reluctantly nods. "O-Okay."

/

Dinner is finished, and they're both feeling the effects of their meal as they now lie sprawled on the bed.

Madoka sleepily rubs her eyes, before she turns to Homura who's right beside her. "Homura-chan?"

There's a small rumble in her throat, and Madoka reaches over to run her hands through Homura's hair.

"...What time are we meeting your aunt? You never told me... when the funeral is, either..."

Homura purrs, even as her eyes remain closed. "...We're not meeting her."

Madoka's hands stop. "A-Are we going there directly?"

Homura shakes her head. "No. We're... not going to the funeral."

Madoka blinks. "W-What?" She sits up in confusion.

Homura sighs when she feels the bed move. She forces her eyes open, and once she sees Madoka looking at her, she also sits up.

"We're... not going," she repeats.

"W-What do you mean?" Madoka frowns. "Then, why... why are we here...?"

Homura fidgets with the ends of her jacket. "...It's the easiest way for me to restock my weapons. There's—a number of army bases close to Tokyo, and I don't have to w-worry about sneaking out and l-lying to your parents..."

"But," Madoka remembers Homura giving Junko her aunt's number, "...Mama will call your aunt."

Homura nods. "My aunt knows."

Madoka stares at her in surprise. "Your aunt knows?"

Homura shakes her head and holds out her hands. "N-Not about anything—b-but that I won't be attending the funeral. She'll cover for us, if Junko-san does call."

This time, Madoka's eyes widen. "Your aunt—knows that you're in Tokyo?"

Homura nods.

"...And she's not even the least bit worried that you're—here—by yourself...?"

Homura tilts her head. "No...? Why would she be?"

Madoka finds it hard to form the proper words. Her brow furrows, and she stares at Homura almost in disbelief. "Homura-chan... you... don't think it's... strange? At all?"

"N-Not really...? I merely explained to her that I would be busy, a-and if she could deflect things if your mother calls her. She... didn't seem to mind?"

Madoka sighs as she places a hand on her forehead. "Homura-chan..."

"I'm... sorry. I don't really see the problem...?"

Madoka leans forward to wrap her arms around Homura. She pulls her down.

"Homura-chan."

She presses her face against Madoka's neck. "Yes...?"

"You've... been with me and my family for a while now."

She nods. "I have..."

"Mama always joins us in the mornings; she always asks us how we're doing."

"...She does."

"...and, she always checks on us. I always call home if I'm going to be late."

"You do."

"Do you... still not see anything wrong, with how your aunt is reacting?"

"Uhm..." Homura pulls away. "Your family is different, Madoka. I don't—think I've ever met a family as close as yours."

Madoka knows that her relationship with her parents is definitely different than Sayaka's. But—she's starting to realize how neglected Homura is if she thinks that worrying about someone—is considered different.

She sighs, knowing this is something else she'll need to bring up to her mother. "...Never mind. I guess... that means you want me to wait here, while you go do whatever it is...?"

Homura shakes her head. "N-No. I was—actually hoping that you'd come with me...?"

Madoka blinks.

"T-There's always the chance that Kyubey will approach you. I would feel better having you by my side." She shyly glances away.

Madoka hugs her close. "I feel the same way, Homura-chan. H-How will you get to the bases? Are we going there tomorrow?"

"The last train runs until midnight... it'll be slower, since I can't expend as much magic, but I plan to hit at least three of the larger bases tonight."

Madoka tenses. "Is that a good idea? Your heart—"

"Don't worry, I have done this plenty of times. It'll be trickier carrying you, but it shouldn't be too much of a problem."

Madoka hears the dismissal in Homura's voice. She sighs. "...And, we're probably going to be sneaking out of the hotel window?"

Homura nods. "Yes. We won't be back before curfew."

"...When, are we going?"

"Uhm..." Homura pulls back to glance over to the clock, before she suddenly scoots closer to Madoka, once again burying her face into her neck. "M-Maybe in a little bit..."

Despite her apprehension, Madoka feels herself smiling. She slides her hand down to poke Homura's stomach, earning her a small squeak. "Someone had a bit too much milk, hm?"

"N-No..."

Madoka kisses the side of her head. "I wouldn't mind staying like this for a while longer too, Homura-chan."

Homura blushes. "...I-I... wouldn't mind... either."

\\

She jots down the answer, and after double checking, she grins when it actually adds up.

"...Seriously Hitomi," she gushes, "thanks for the help! You know me, the things we learn in class seem to go in one ear and out the other!" She laughs and rubs her head even though Hitomi can't see her.

"Of course, Sayaka-san. I'm just glad that I was able to help you. Are there any other equations you are having problems with?"

"Uhm."

She glances to the side, to where her mother stands, arms crossed; it's a reminder that she's still grounded, and that her phone call had been an exception after she had almost thrown her workbook at the wall.

"...Nah, I think I got this. Your explanation was really clear, and I was able to follow everything really easily. As expected of the class representative!"

"...Sayaka-san. I wasn't able to meet up with you after school because of student council, but—"

"Ah, uhmmmm, actually, could we discuss this tomorrow, Hitomi? I'm uh, still kind of grounded," she looks over, "...and my mom's kind of shooting lasers at me with her eyes."

Her mom arches an eyebrow at her comment.

"...Very well, Sayaka-san. We are still meeting tomorrow morning, correct?"

"Y-Yeah! Of course! Uh... unless you have... other plans...?"

"I will see you at our usual spot, Sayaka-san."

"Yup! T-Thanks again, Hitomi! Sorry, for taking up your time."

"You know I don't mind helping any of my friends. As I'm sure your mother is still waiting, I will see you tomorrow?"

"Y-Yeah! Thanks again!"

"Have a good night, Sayaka-san."

"You too, Hitomi!"

There's a brief pause, and Sayaka hears Hitomi sigh, before there's a click as the call disconnects.

"All done?" her mother asks.

Sayaka turns around to face her. "Y-Yup." She holds out her notes, showing her mother the problem that Hitomi had helped her work out.

Her mother merely extends her hand, and Sayaka sighs and drops her cell phone into her waiting palm.

"Wait."

She's given a curious look.

"Can... I at least contact Madoka? To see how she's doing?"

"...Alright."

She's handed back her phone, which she immediately unlocks to send her message.

/

Homura purrs, nudging Madoka with her head as she remains curled against her. She's warm and comfortable, and she wants to stay here, being held by Madoka, forever.

She knows, though, that there are things to do, and after one last nudge, she reluctantly pulls away.

"Madoka...?"

"Hm...?"

"It's... getting late." Homura readjusts her glasses to peer over at the clock. Her ear twitches. "We need to leave soon."

Madoka presses her face against her as a sound of protest escapes from her mouth. "...Couldn't you go tomorrow, Homura-chan? We're... going to be here all weekend. Is there something else you're planning on doing...?"

Homura's tail hits the bed. "I would... prefer getting everything over with as soon as possible."

Madoka sighs, still refusing to let go. "But..."

"I... do have plans—for tomorrow at least."

Madoka lifts her head to see Homura absently staring to the side.

"I was..." she breathes out slowly. Her voice drops to a whisper. "I'm... going to mourn for my mother, in my own way..."

Madoka reaches out and gently strokes Homura's ears. "...I'm sorry; that was inconsiderate of me."

Homura shakes her head. "N-No, but... the sooner we get this over with, the better. A-After tomorrow..." Her eyes nervously dart around. "After, tomorrow... I have no other plans, actually... so..." There's a small blush on her cheeks, and finally, she meets Madoka's eyes. "...w-we'll have the rest of the days free... to uhm... d-do whatever you want..."

Madoka blinks as her hands stop moving.

"I—was, uhm, t-thinking... we c-could go to SkyTree... t-they say the view from the top is really nice... a-and there's shops inside, and e-even an aquarium..." Homura's tail is moving side from side, and her ears are twitching nervously. "W-We could... d-do some shopping in Shibuya... o-or, visit the aquarium in Ikebukuro...? I-It doesn't really matter, actually... just..."

"Homura-chan...?"

"Y-Yes...?"

Mouth dry, Madoka nervously licks her lips. "W-Would... would it be bad, if... if I considered it—a..." she blushes, "date...?"

Homura's ear twitches as she shyly glances away. "I... w-wouldn't mind," she says softly.

Madoka feels something in her chest tighten, and she moves forward to engulf Homura in a hug. Her eyes are stinging, and she realizes that she's crying.

"M-Madoka? W-What's wrong? I'm s-sorry. Please don't cry—"

Madoka laughs softly, shaking her head. "N-No. I-I'm—really... really happy, Homura-chan." She buries her face into Homura's neck. "It... feels like I've been waiting, a long, long time to just... spend time with you."

Hesitantly, Homura returns the hug. "I..." she swallows heavily, and there's tears building in her eyes as well. "I've... felt the same way, too..."

Before Madoka can say anything else, there's a familiar beep in the room, and Homura jumps, startled at the sound. Madoka immediately leans forward, placing a kiss to the top of her head, before she pulls away.

"That was my phone, Homura-chan." She taps Homura's nose. "It always seems to catch you by surprise."

"Ah..." Homura ducks her head, embarrassed.

"...I'll change the tone," Madoka murmurs as she sits up.

Homura absently rubs the back of her hand against her cheek. She watches as Madoka moves to the desk to check her message. The phone is lifted, and she blinks when Madoka merely relocks it without bothering to send a reply.

"W-Who was it?" Homura asks as she sits up.

Madoka flinches slightly, before she lowers her phone back to the desk. "Oh. Uhm... Just..."

Homura tilts her head. "...Madoka?"

Madoka sighs. "It was—from Sayaka-chan..."

"...You're not going to answer?" Curious, Homura crawls over to join her.

Madoka glances down to her phone. "I..."

"Did something happen between the two of you?"

Madoka frowns as she turns to face Homura, who is now sitting right beside her. "She's... the reason why..." She can't finish the sentence, and her hands curl in, forming into tight fists.

Homura's ear twitches in slight confusion. "Madoka...?"

Madoka blinks rapidly, trying to control her tears. "She's... the reason w-why you're... dying," she whispers.

"Oh..." Homura nervously glances to the floor. "Maybe, but..." She looks back up. "...Maybe not. While it's true she... may have had a hand in the current condition of my heart..." Homura shakes her head. "I believe, it's... more like she merely accelerated it." She places a hand to her chest. "My heart was already weak to begin with; it was only a matter of time until it would start failing."

Madoka reaches for her as the tears spill out. "Stop—doing that!"

Homura blinks in confusion. "D-Doing what?"

"A-Acting like you're okay, that y-you're fine with just—that you're f-fine with—*dying*!"

"But... I am—"

Homura winces as there's a sharp thump against her chest—and she gasps as she falls onto the bed with Madoka on top of her.

"Don't say that!"

She coughs in reply, and Madoka immediately sits up in horror.

"Oh my god, Homura-chan! I-I'm so sorry! A-Are you okay?" Her hands are on Homura's chest, and she's panicking with the thought that she had hurt her.

"I-I'm fine," Homura says, her face now flushed because Madoka is so close, and her hands are— "M-Madoka...?" she gasps out. "C-Can you... p-please, g-give me some room...?"

Madoka quickly pulls away. "I-I'm sorry," she repeats with tears in her eyes.

Homura shakes her head. She knows she doesn't need to use her magic, and she presses her hand against her chest as she tries to calm down.

It's a simple exercise of a deep inhale, followed by a slow exhale. She repeats this for a few minutes, until it feels like her heart is no longer hammering in her chest.

Finally, she focuses on Madoka, who's twisting her hands in guilt.

"I'm okay," she tells her.

Madoka reaches for her, but stops, and drops her arms to her side. "I-I'm sorry..."

Homura gathers her in her arms, pressing her head against Madoka's cheek. "I'm fine." She looks over to the clock and her tail flicks to the side. She pauses, before she hugs Madoka tighter. "I'm fine."

/

She grasps Homura tightly, pressing her face against her chest as she feels the air around them move—as she feels Homura move.

"Madoka?"

"Nn?"

"Look."

She cracks one eye open, and timidly raises her head.

Tokyo sits below them, and the sheer amount of lights and buildings seen draws an indescribable feeling to bubble in her chest. She grips Homura tighter.

"It's—beautiful," she murmurs, both eyes now open.

Homura nods. "Yes. It's... different, than Mitakihara."

Madoka wholeheartedly agrees. Maybe it's because it's a city she doesn't know—one that she isn't attached to, that she feels she can enjoy the view.

Back home—this high, and everything would definitely seem—familiar almost... She gulps as her mind pictures the buildings down below crumpled and turned into rubble.

Homura can feel her shaking in her arms. "Don't worry, we'll be back on solid ground soon."

Madoka nods, and to her frustration, tears are once more in her eyes.

The world—is such a beautiful place.

How many times had she been the one to destroy it?

/

Though she's nervous, she's also happy, because Homura is including her on her 'secret missions' that she usually does by herself; she wants to believe that it brings them closer, somehow.

The path to the military base is simple enough, and Homura carries her as she navigates through the greyscaled landscape.

Her heart thumps loudly, and her hands are sweaty as they past more guards; a quick check, and yes, there are guns sitting close by, and she knows that what they're doing is breaking and entering and—

"I need both my hands for this," Homura murmurs as she sets her on the ground. "I'll be right back."

She sucks in a shaky breath, before she nods.

It feels like she had barely blinked, when Homura is once again holding her hand.

"Homura-chan?"

"I'm done; we need to go," Homura tells her, not at all breaking her stride as she swoops in, and easily lifts Madoka into her arms.

As soon as they're outside, Homura leaps high into the air. Madoka ignores the feeling of weightlessness, instead keeping her eyes concentrated on Homura's face.

Despite the rush of wind as they make their escape, all she sees is that mask of indifference.

She reaches forward, her fingertips gently stroking Homura's cheek.

She sees lavender flicker her way, sees the slight parting of her lips from her confusion, but Homura quickly turns away to focus her attention forward.

When they finally stop inside an empty alley, Homura is breathing heavily. She lowers Madoka to the ground, who immediately hugs her close, bringing up her hands to rub soothing circles on Homura's back.

Homura leans against her, eyes closed as she catches her breath.

"Are you okay, Homura-chan?" Madoka murmurs into her ear.

"Y—" her throat is dry from the exertion, and she clears her throat. "Yes... I'm okay."

Madoka continues to hold her, her hands still moving across her back, as if trying to speed her recovery somehow.

Eventually, the breaths in Madoka's ear slow, and Homura straightens up.

"T-Thank you," she says as she opens her eyes.

Madoka can see her tail flicking restlessly behind her. She leans forward, ignoring how Homura stiffens when she kisses her cheek.

She pulls back, her own face slightly pink. "Are you sure you're okay to visit two more bases, Homura-chan? Maybe you should—"

Homura shakes her head, clearing her throat to hide her embarrassment. "I-It'll only serve to be more of a hassle if there's a big gap between raids..."

Madoka regards her curiously. "...Let me guess, you've tried this before?"

"Yes. They... will increase security as soon as they figure out there's been a robbery; it means having to go through a lot more locks to find the weapons that I want..."

Madoka sighs. "Okay... but," she briefly glances to the side, "...how about we get something to drink first?" She gently places her hand where Homura's sternum is. "You should rest for a bit."

Homura remains quiet, ignoring Madoka's hand as she thinks about what she wants to drink.

Madoka smiles, recognizing that eager gleam in Homura's eyes. She readjusts Homura's glasses for her, before she leans forward again. Her aim is lower, and this time, her lips brush against the corner of Homura's mouth.

"...Let's... get some milk, okay, Homura-chan?"

Homura's ears twitch as she blushes.

She's not sure what she's looking forward to more: milk, or...

She glances to Madoka, who has her head turned away in embarrassment.

"O-Okay," she says softly.

/

The visit to the second army base is just as simple as the first.

It's a quick hop on the train, where they sit together amongst the scattered commuters, and then sway with traffic for half an hour until they reach their stop. There's a brief moment of panic when Madoka receives a message from her mother, but she merely tells her that they're heading to bed early, and their exchange ends there.

Just to be sure, she turns off her phone. She takes a calming breath, and after giving Homura a nod, Homura continues to lead her down the streets; they make several turns here, and more turns there.

When they reach a seemingly arbitrary spot, at least to Madoka, Homura suddenly transforms, and time is once again stopping as her shield clicks into place.

Like before, Madoka is carried in, and another blink later, they're once again exiting the compound.

Back into a different alleyway, where Homura leans heavily against Madoka as she struggles to catch her breath.

Madoka notices her breathing sounds more laboured, and she's scared that next time, Homura's going to collapse in her arms.

"Homura-chan..."

Homura coughs into her hand. "I'm—okay..."

Madoka rubs her back, and there's a shine as Homura holds her soul gem to her heart.

Her breathing slowly strengthens, and once she's done healing, she tries to straighten up.

"I'm okay," she repeats, voice now sounding stronger.

"Homura-chan..." Madoka still holds her close, refusing to let Homura pull away. "Please," she pleads, "can't you do this later, Homura-chan? You—don't even need that many—w-weapons, do you?"

Homura shakes her head. "You don't understand, Madoka. I am severely understocked —"

Madoka grips her tightly, pressing her face against Homura's neck. "You're—severely *injured*," she hisses into her ear. "You told me you don't want to use that much magic, but you can't even—run—without ending up like this. Please, Homura-chan... You said—that you want to spend the weekend with me, but I'm afraid you're going to..." she closes her eyes, feeling that lump appear once more in her throat, "...*die*, before that happens."

"I'm—" She can feel drops of water hit her neck; feel the slight shake of Madoka's shoulders. She sighs, before she presses her hands against Madoka's back. "...Okay. W-We'll head back to the hotel."

Madoka hugs her close. "Thank you," she whispers.

\\

When they sneak back into their room, the clock informs them that it's close to midnight.

As Madoka shuts the balcony door to lock it, Homura makes an unsteady bee line towards the refrigerator. By the time Madoka is done drawing the curtains, Homura is already on the bed with a small pile of milk next to her.

Straw already stuck in her mouth, Homura holds out her other hand, offering a box to Madoka when she turns her way.

She smiles, and moves to join her on the bed.

They drink in silence, with occasionally thumps from Homura's tail; Madoka has a feeling that Homura hasn't even noticed.

Only halfway done with hers, Madoka turns to Homura. She stares, and the smile on her face grows because Homura is completely enamored by the milk.

Without meaning to, she reaches over to pinch Homura's cheek.

Startled, she turns to Madoka with flattened ears.

"Nothing," Madoka reassures her. "You... just looked really cute drinking your milk."

Homura's ears twitch, and she blushes as she continue to drink.

Madoka yawns as a wave of exhaustion hits her.

"We should—head to bed soon," Homura mumbles.

Madoka nods as she rubs her eyes. "Y-Yeah. We'll... take a bath tomorrow morning. What time do we have to be up by, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances over to the clock. "There's... no set time, really... I think it opens around eleven; there's no rush though, we can sleep in, and maybe have lunch somewhere before going there."

Madoka is curious, but she merely nods. "Okay." She hops off the bed. "I'll go get our pajamas so that we can get ready for bed."

"O-Okay. Thank you..."

Madoka nods, still smiling. After she puts her unfinished milk box into the refrigerator, she heads over to their suitcase. As she digs out their clothes, her eyes skim over the things that she had packed; she cringes at her selection.

Maybe they did need to go shopping, after all.

She finds their pajamas, before she stands and turns to face Homura.

"Here you go, Homura-chan. I was... kind of half asleep when I was packing..." She sheepishly holds out two sets that are coloured pink.

Finished with the milk, Homura is now gathering the empty boxes into her arms. "No, thank you again for packing mine as well," she says over her shoulder.

Madoka absently brushes the clothes with her fingers, before she draws them close to her chest.

"...Madoka?"

She blinks back the tears, raising her head only to find Homura in front of her, staring at her in worry.

She shakes her head. "I-I'm fine..."

Homura abandons the empty boxes to the floor, and quickly moves over to loop an arm around Madoka's shoulders. "L-Let's go get ready for bed..."

Madoka nods, not trusting her own voice.

Homura leads her to the bathroom to get changed.

\

With a small gasp, she opens her eyes.

She blinks rapidly, her hands reaching to touch her face. There's water on her fingertips, damp and cold on her skin. Her dream is fading, but it doesn't mean that she doesn't remember.

She breathes in shakily, before she scrubs her face with her hands.

She sighs, dropping her hands to the bed with a small thump. She blinks, focusing on the ceiling above her, barely visible as her eyes adjust to the darkness.

It's then that she realizes—Homura is no longer curled around her. She turns her head, and finds that side of the bed empty. A tentative pat, and the spot is cold.

She sits up immediately, heart still pounding from her nightmare. A glance to the bathroom, but there's no light, and the door seems to be opened.

"Homura-chan...?"

There's a rustle, and she turns to face it.

"Madoka...? W-What's wrong?"

Homura appears from the balcony—and she realizes the opened curtain was the source of light all along.

"I..." she sighs in relief. "I thought... I d-didn't..."

Homura strides across the room, and a moment later, she climbs into the bed to rejoin Madoka's side.

"It's okay. I'm here..." Homura says softly, moving to hug her.

Madoka presses her face against Homura's neck, wrapping her arms around her; her body feels cold. "W-What were you doing...?"

Homura remains quiet.

Finally—

"...Thinking."

Madoka gently pulls her back down to the bed. She readjusts the blankets around them, before she once again presses against Homura.

"About...?"

"T-Things..."

Madoka strokes her ears. "...Did you want to talk about it?"

There's a soft rumble from Homura's throat.

"I... was thinking about my mother," Homura admits softly. "I... never really got the chance to... understand her..."

Madoka lowers her hands to rest along the side of Homura's face.

Homura closes her eyes. "...It's... really vague, b-but... I remember—h-how much she used to love me..."

Madoka wipes her tears away.

"I—never got the c-chance to really talk to her. M-Maybe... m-maybe I c-could've... changed things, somehow..." Her breath hitches, and Madoka hugs her close.

"Shhh. Your—mother... I—" she swallows heavily, thinking of her own mother.

"...And... I—was t-thinking about you, too..."

"Me...?"

Homura nods. "M-Maybe... it's the same way w-with you..."

"W-What do you mean...?"

Homura curls in, and as her tears trickle down, the droplets hit Madoka's neck. "I... n-never got the c-chance to talk to you, either. A-All I w-wanted—was to s-save y-you, but," she hiccups as her tears spill out faster, "but—I n-never asked you, h-how you felt..."

"Homura-chan..."

"I-I j-just want you to be h-happy, b-but I end up—h-hurting you e-every time. I-I'm s-s-sorry—" she sobs out, "I-I'm—s-so—u-u-useless—"

Madoka grips her tightly. "S-Stop it, Homura-chan. Stop—"

Homura is shaking, and Madoka pulls back in alarm.

"Homura-chan! Homura-chan! STOP IT!"

"I-I-I'm—"

There's a brief pause as Madoka debates, before she slams her forehead into Homura's.

She winces at the pain, but forces her eyes open. "H-Homura-chan?"

She hears Homura's whine right by her ear; the hit seems to have worked.

Madoka quickly reaches over, and after a few fumbles, the light above the bed is flicked on.

She blinks as her eyes adjust, until finally, she can see Homura next to her, prone, with her ears flat and tail limp.

Madoka all but leaps off the bed. She trips on her way to their bags, but ignores the burn from the carpet as she heads for the grief seeds that Mami had given them.

Once they're in her hands, she's more careful as she quickly returns to Homura's side. She gently lifts her, placing her head into her lap.

"Homura-chan? Show me your soul gem."

Homura whines. Madoka leans closer and forces Homura's eyes open.

"Show. Me. Your. Soul. Gem," she grits out.

There's a small rumble in her throat.

"*Homura-chan*."

She slowly lifts her hand, and a second later, there's a glow as her ring transforms into her soul gem.

Madoka blinks back angry tears when she sees how dark it is; she knew should've checked earlier. She secures it in her hand, before there's a light clink as a grief seed is placed right next to it.

It takes two until Homura's soul gem is once again shining brightly. Madoka sighs in relief, feeling the tension drain from her shoulders as she gently strokes Homura's head.

With Homura still lying in her lap, she deposits the grief seeds, both used and unused, by the desk clock, before she turns back to face her.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks heavily. "Ma...doka...?"

Madoka leans in, bringing her face closer to Homura. "...Is that what you really think?"

Homura freezes, her exhaustion evaporating with how cold Madoka's voice sounds. "M-Madoka...?"

Madoka gently trails her fingers across Homura's face; there's still traces of her tears along her cheeks.

"I..." Madoka exhales slowly. "I... don't know... no, I—don't want to know, how anyone could dismiss and pretend that someone... as sweet and kind as you no longer exists in their life..."

Her fingers glide down, and she's now cupping the side of Homura's face.

"As for me..." she closes her eyes, "...I agree; I... never asked for any of this."

All at once, Homura feels the crushing weight against her chest tighten.

"I never asked... for my potential to grow, enough so that I will become the strongest Witch in history. I never asked..." she opens her eyes, "for you to save me."

Homura struggles to breathe as Madoka's words repeat in her mind and—

"Homura-chan," Madoka leans forward, eyes now angry. "Listen to me—*LISTEN-TO-ME*—" both her hands are holding Homura's face, "listen to me, okay, Homura-chan?"

The tears well in Homura's eyes as she gasps, trying to suck in a breath.

"Breathe in," Madoka tells her gently. "Breathe in, Homura-chan."

A shallow breath, and Madoka nods.

"Hold it, okay?"

Homura stares at her, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"Now, breathe out."

She releases a small puff of air.

"Breathe in."

Madoka repeats this many, many times, until Homura is finally calm, and no longer gasping for breath.

"Show me your soul gem, Homura-chan."

Obediently, her ring turns back into the darkened jewel, and Madoka once again cleans it.

"Okay."

The silver band returns to her finger, and Homura blinks as a drop of water hits her face.

"I'm sorry," Madoka says softly. She leans forward, her forehead now touching Homura's. "I'm—" she takes in a deep breath, "so, so, sorry, for not remembering; for forgetting someone as important as you."

"M-Mado—"

Madoka shakes her head. "Let me finish, Homura-chan."

Homura clamps her mouth shut as her eyes continue to search Madoka's face.

"It's true... that, most likely if I had remembered, I... would've tried to stop you."

"Ma—"

Madoka places a finger to Homura's lips. "Shhh. I'm not done yet, Homura-chan."

A soft whine is released from her throat, and Madoka absently runs her hands through Homura's hair to calm her down.

"But—" she gives her a wobbly smile, her eyes once more brimming with tears, "...there's nothing wrong, with hoping for a better outcome. You wanted to save me... You—wanted to save... your friend... H-How could I be angry at you for that...?"

Homura reaches out with her hand, her fingers touching Madoka's cheek as they flow with tears. "...M-Madoka?"

"You're trying your best, every day. All alone, by yourself..." Madoka draws in a shaky breath. "Homura-chan?"

Homura stares, eyes still wide; still afraid. "Y-Yes...?" Her voice is small and meek; like the Homura that Madoka remembers.

"...You've come so far. You told me that you'd protect me, didn't you?"

Homura tries to sit up, but her actions are hampered as Madoka continues to lean against her. "Y-Yes! I-I'll save you—"

Madoka nods. Her smile widens even as the tears continue to fall. "Don't give up, okay, Homura-chan? I told you, that I believe in you. That hasn't changed—and it never will."

Homura sucks in a breath, before she presses her hands over her face, trying her best to keep from wailing out loud.

Madoka kisses her forehead. "It's okay, Homura-chan... It's... okay."

/

She's listening to her quiet breathing; a steady rhythm heard as her chest continues to rise and fall.

It reassures her that Homura is still there; that she's still alive.

They're pressed as close as possible, but somehow, it feels like they're worlds apart.

And—maybe they are.

She threads her fingers through Homura's hair. "...Homura-chan?"

Homura shifts in her arms, but her slow breathing continues, and Madoka knows she's the only one still awake.

"Homura-chan... I'll definitely save you, too," she whispers softly.

There's a quiet purr from Homura, and Madoka gently strokes her ears.

She waits for another minute, before she finally closes her eye**s.**

AN: zzzzz. Sadly, I did not update faster;; I think one month~ updates will be the usual for now. ? ? The wider the gaps are for my updates, the more reluctant I am to update;;; uh ohh

As always, thank you for reading/reviewing ! It's... december, and then, it'll be the New Year, and then it'll be a year since I wrote this story? I never thought I'd reach ~25 chapters ? Again, thanks for sticking with this story! Merry Christmas, and happy new year.

Chapter 27: dreamland part 1

"Sayaka—"

Her mother blinks when she finds the room empty, and more surprisingly, that Sayaka's bed is already made.

She scratches her head in confusion, before she steps back, closing the door behind her.

She makes her way to the kitchen, and it's when she's passing the dining room table that she notices an unfamiliar sliver of white out of the corner of her eye. She picks up the paper, examining the words scribbled in her daughter's writing.

'I went to class early to ask the teacher some questions about my homework -Sayaka'

Her mother stares at the note for a moment longer.

It's uncharacteristic of Sayaka to leave without breakfast, and almost unheard of her to be awake so early.

The note is left on the table, and she turns to prepare breakfast for herself and her husband.

\\

She shades her eyes with her hand, squinting as she stares across the river. It sparkles and glitters, with visible ripples on the surface that are carried along as a light breeze blows past.

This early, and she's one of the very few on the path to school. The empty spots besides her reminds her that it's been a while since she's been the one waiting.

It's quiet, and her ears pick up the rustles of leaves, as well as the soft trickles as the river continues downstream. The air is cool and fresh; coated in morning dew that can still be seen sprinkled amongst the foliage.

She breathes deeply, slowly; in, and then out.

If not for the ring that weighs heavily on her finger, she could pretend that this is the world they live in: bright and shimmering, and ever peaceful.

She knows better now.

A sharp breath is sucked in, and with one fluid motion, she slaps her cheeks hard enough to sting.

Certain thoughts are pushed away, and she concentrates instead on the fading pain. She straightens out, and her eyesight unconsciously drift towards the river once more.

She's distracted enough that she doesn't notice the approaching figure, nor the hand that reaches for her shoulder.

Her yell echoes down the street as she jumps. She spins around, only to see Hitomi, whose hand is still held out, face surprised.

"I apologize, Sayaka-san," Hitomi murmurs as she recovers. "You weren't responding when I was calling your name."

"Ah," Sayaka laughs as she rubs the back of her head sheepishly, "sorry, Hitomi! It's just a little bit earlier than usual—I guess I'm still half asleep!"

Hitomi nods, ignoring the obvious lie. She brushes down her skirt. "It—is indeed still early, Sayaka-san. Should we... start walking?"

Sayaka fights back the urge to run, and gives a weak nod. "S-Sure." She swallows, and glances to the river to avoid looking at Hitomi's face.

They both fall into step, walking side by side down the familiar path.

Hitomi is the first to break the silence. "Have... you spoken with Madoka-san?"

Sayaka grips her bag tightly, before relaxing her hand. "I messaged her, but I think she's a bit too busy to respond..."

"I do hope they're doing alright," Hitomi murmurs, her own hand moving to rest along her chin. Her eyes flicker to Sayaka's. "Do... you know the reason for their trip, Sayaka-san?"

"Ah." Sayaka nervously glances around. "Some... family business to take care of."

Hitomi seems to mull over her words, weighing them, and trying to understand the significance of Madoka tagging along.

She seems satisfied with her conclusion, and instead steers the conversation to the reason why they're here.

"I... spoke with Kamijou-kun yesterday, during lunch."

Sayaka feels her pulse quicken as a shadow starts to creep over her heart.

"Y-Yeah?" Her voice sounds as brittle as she seems.

Hitomi notices—how could she not, and she waits a moment, eying Sayaka, and hesitating on her next words.

"He..."

Sayaka waits for it—bracing herself for the inevitable.

"He..." Hitomi sighs as her legs come to a halt,"...he postponed his answer."

Sayaka feels something drop, but it's definitely not the ground underneath her. She blinks in confusion, raising her head to look at Hitomi clearly. The spot besides her is empty, and she quickly turns around to face her.

"What?"

Hitomi nods. "He... needs to think about it. After being released from the hospital... after the sudden recovery of his body. He's—still adapting to everything and needs time to readjust..."

Her voice trails off, and Sayaka is still watching her. She notices how Hitomi's eyes squint ever so slightly, how her lips dip down.

"When... will he tell you?"

"The end of next week..."

"Oh..."

"Yes."

She hears it—an echo of her own vulnerability in Hitomi's voice. Something sparks inside her, and a second later, she's gripping Hitomi's hand, and dragging her along.

"Sayaka-san?" Hitomi stumbles behind her in confusion.

"...That idiot," Sayaka growls out.

"Sayaka-san? What's—"

Instead of heading straight, they make an abrupt turn at the intersection.

"Sayaka-san?" Hitomi cranes her neck, watching as the school becomes smaller behind them. "The, uhm, school is the other way?"

"I know."

"Where—are we going...?"

When Sayaka refuses to answer, Hitomi walks faster, enough that she's voluntarily following after instead of being dragged along.

Finally, Sayaka drops her hand as they stop in front of a vending machine. Hitomi blinks as Sayaka gestures towards it.

"Pick something. My treat."

Green eyes flicker to the machine, and then back to Sayaka's face.

Sayaka opens her mouth to repeat her words, but Hitomi finally points to one of the drinks.

"...Are you sure?" She sounds confused, and Hitomi nods with a small smile.

Once their drinks are in their hands, Sayaka glances around, and spots an empty bench nearby.

She nods towards it, and Hitomi follows her.

They take a seat, falling into silence, and the rustles of plastic and metal replace their words.

Hitomi sips her drink politely, eyes glancing around. "...I wasn't aware there was a vending machine here," she murmurs, trying to break the ice.

Sayaka nods. "Yeah, I saw it, the uh, other day. It's—kind of a dead place to put it though. Wonder how many people even know it's here?"

Hitomi glances to her drink, her eyes searching for the best by date stamped on the box. "...Enough, that the stock inside seems fairly recent."

Sayaka bobs her head, her mouth full of tea.

"...Is—there a reason you brought me here, Sayaka-san?" Hitomi asks her as she absently reads the label; it makes her think of Homura—and Madoka.

"Kyousuke's an idiot."

Hitomi is startled at her words, and lifts her head to stare at her in confusion.

"He's—a big, fat idiot," Sayaka repeats, her eyes almost blazing as she meets Hitomi's gaze.

Hitomi's mouth opens, and then closes with several attempts at a response. Finally, she settles on her first thought.

"I... beg your pardon...?"

Sayaka leans back against the bench, tilting her head up, "ahhh, I can't believe that idiot has to think about it! We've all been friends, for how long now? You visited him at the hospital and everything, and he has to think about it?!"

Sayaka angrily knocks back her drink, and Hitomi watches her, still not comprehending.

"Sayaka-san?"

Sayaka wipes her mouth with the back of hand, still angry. "Geez! I've always known that he was kind of slow, but I never thought he'd be that much of an idiot!" She turns to Hitomi. "I've already lost count of how many love letters you've received—just this year alone! Does he not realize—just how popular you are? How—lucky he is?"

Hitomi blinks.

"If—" Sayaka shakes her head, "if I were a guy, and you had confessed to me, Hitomi—I would've been thanking my lucky stars! Kyousuke doesn't even know how good he has it—"

She chokes, turning her head away as she tries to control her emotions.

She wants—everyone to be happy, and she realizes that this includes—Hitomi as well. If Kyousuke could make her happy, then...

Hitomi watches her, noticing her shaking shoulders; the way her fingers are tightly curled around the can—she can hear the crinkle and pop as aluminum compresses in her hands.

Her eyes are absent as she lowers the milk box. "...Thank you, Sayaka-san. If..." she drops her head, "if—only you were a guy, maybe... maybe things would have been easier..."

Sayaka lifts her head, eyes wide and eyebrows now furrowed. "Hitomi...?"

Hitomi laughs into her hand at Sayaka's expression. She's smiling as she moves to stand. "I really am lucky to have you and Madoka-san in my life... We should get to school now though; it's a good thing we left a bit earlier than usual."

With years of etiquette classes built into her, she somehow makes the sight of finishing her boxed drink look refined.

Once done, she discards it into the trash can nearby.

Sayaka is still staring—and Hitomi gives her a smile. "Shall we go, Sayaka-san? Have you finished your drink?"

Sayaka fumbles and almost drops the can in her hands. "Uh... yeah—I just—have a bit—uhm, left." She takes a drink, and chokes as the last drops go down the wrong pipe.

She coughs, trying to clear her throat, and the hand on her back has her jumping forward and out of her seat.

"Are you alright, Sayaka-san?"

"Uh huh," she squeaks out, one hand held up, "yup, I'm completely alright!" She throws the can into the trash, and it takes her two more tries until it finally lands inside.

"Sayaka-san?"

She laughs nervously and quickly grabs her bag from the bench. "Let's—uhm go to school now, Hitomi!"

Sayaka starts walking, and Hitomi follows after her at a slower pace. She tilts her head back, her eyes glazing past the trees that surround them.

She sighs softly.

"Hitomi! Hurry up!" Sayaka waves at her, urging her to move faster.

She smiles in response, though it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

/

She groans, curling her body in when she hears the alarm echoing in her ears. She hears a small whine, followed by a low rumble as Homura presses her face into her neck.

She lifts her head, her hand automatically seeking those soft ears, placating them as they twitch from the loud sounds.

One eye blearily opens, and she finally pulls herself from the blankets, sitting up as she tries to locate her phone.

A moment later, silence washes into the room, and Homura's distressed rumbles slow, and then lower into soft, more content purrs.

Madoka yawns in her hand, before she stretches with her arms above her. Homura protests her movement, and buries her face into her lap.

She strokes her ears once more, fingers lightly scratching the spots she knows Homura loves.

"Homura-chan? I'm going to shower first, can you let go?"

Homura whines again, earning her another scratch on her ears.

"Homura-chan."

Reluctantly, Homura moves off her, and latches onto the nearest pillow, burying her face with another low rumble.

Madoka smiles, and tucks the blankets around her. She leans over, kissing the only exposed part of Homura's head, before she scoots off the bed.

Homura is falling back asleep when the door clicks shut.

\\

She glances to the clock: it's almost 11, and regrettably, the complimentary breakfast is already over. Her stomach grumbles, and she turns to the refrigerator that is only filled with one thing.

Homura is still resting in bed, and considering the night they had, she doesn't mind letting her sleep a little longer. She did say that they could have lunch somewhere, so she knows that whatever Homura's plans are, it's still not too late.

Her stomach reminds her again that she's hungry, and after another glance at the bundle of blankets, she slowly walks over to the small kitchenette. She bypasses the snacks on the table, not wanting to wake Homura by making too much noise.

As quietly as possible, she pulls open the refrigerator door. The small racks inside rattles, prompting her to quickly check on Homura; she's still sleeping. She turns back, and spots her unfinished drink in front of the many boxes that are still threatening to spill out. She grabs that, and after a brief debate, reaches for another box of strawberry milk.

Once the door is closed, she heads over to the table.

She works her way through the first box, and her stomach is unsatisfied when the straw draws up empty air.

She immediately tries to cut off the sound, and looks across just in time to see the bundle of blankets shifting. A few seconds later, Homura pops out, ears twitching as she looks around.

So much for not waking her up.

Madoka glances down to her drink, before an amused smile blooms on her face. She sets aside the empty box, and reaches for the other one. The plastic crinkles as she removes the straw, and as expected, Homura turns to face her.

"Good morning, Homura-chan," Madoka says as she punches the straw into the opening. She brings her drink up for a sip, and the sweet scent of strawberries hits her nose.

"M-Morning," Homura murmurs as she rubs her eyes with her hand. "Is—it," she drops her hands, and moves to crawl out of bed, "breakfast time...?"

Madoka pulls the straw away, "mm, it's—closer to lunch time, actually."

Homura stumbles as her feet touch the floor, and Madoka moves forward in alarm. She doesn't fall, but Madoka is in front of her, her hand lightly resting on her waist a few seconds later.

"Are you okay, Homura-chan?"

"Hmmm...?"

Madoka blinks. She moves her drink to the side, watching as Homura leans towards it, her hands reaching even though her eyes are closed.

Madoka grins, and gently taps Homura's cheek with her hand. "Go brush your teeth first, Homura-chan."

Homura's ears flatten, and her tail flicks behind as she pouts.

Madoka responds by gently pushing her towards the bathroom. "Go."

"...Okay."

/

They sit on the bed, a few empty boxes next to them as Homura works her way through her fourth one. It's her last one, at least for now, because Madoka wants her to have enough space in her stomach for real food.

"Where should we grab lunch, Homura-chan?" Madoka murmurs as she absently browses her phone.

Homura continues drinking, not willing to remove the straw from her mouth until she's finished.

Madoka glances over, before she turns back to her phone. "I'll look for some places then?"

A familiar, hollow bubbling sound is her response.

Homura tries to finish the last drops by blowing air into the box, and then squeezing it. She does this a few times, and Madoka smiles, tilting her head just a little, leaning close to Homura affectionately.

Finally, the box is empty and Homura pulls it away. She licks her lips, and resists the sudden urge to lick her hand. "...There's uhm, a website that has some recommendations for tourists. There was one that seemed like it would be good to try..."

Her voice trails off, and Madoka looks up to see her staring at the empty boxes.

She scratches Homura's ears, and holds the phone out for her to see. "Do you remember the address?"

Homura nods, forgetting about the milk briefly as she reaches for the device.

After she's handed back her phone, Madoka skims the menu. It's a normal restaurant, well known for their burgers, and monthly specials of region specific items.

She continues to scroll, and when she reaches the last page, a yellow circle at the bottom catches her eye. She reads over the small print, before lifting her eyes to stare at Homura.

Homura quickly ducks her head. "T-There's—other—places on the site too, if that place—doesn't sound good..."

Madoka leans over, one arm reaching up to wrap around Homura's head to pull her close. She's smiling as she feels Homura press her face against her.

"I don't mind going there, Homura-chan."

Homura nuzzles Madoka's cheek. "You don't?"

"No." She holds her for a moment longer, before pulling away. "We'll leave after you shower?"

Homura scrambles off the bed. "I'll—be right back."

"I already set out your outfit," Madoka tells her as she points to the clothes on top of the suitcase.

"Thank you." Homura quickly retrieves them, and disappears into the bathroom.

Madoka is absently watching a movie on TV when the door opens, and Homura steps out, dressed for the day.

She checks the clock, and less than ten minutes have passed. The voices on the TV cut off as she presses the power button.

"You should bring a jacket too, Madoka," Homura tells her as she readjusts the cuff of her own jacket. "We... will most likely be out until dark—possibly making it back just a bit before curfew."

Madoka nods. "Okay, Homura-chan."

She dons her own jacket, before she helps Homura readjust the cap over her head. After she makes sure it sits correctly atop Homura's cat ears, she smiles and takes Homura's hand.

"Let's go, Homura-chan."

Homura tugs Madoka forward, and whines when she meets resistance.

Madoka grins when Homura pouts at her. "Calm down, Homura-chan. I'm sure they won't run out before we get there." She double checks the door to make sure it's locked. "Okay."

Homura immediately leads her through the hallway.

As they wait for the elevator, Madoka keeps her arm around Homura's waist, effectively stopping her from running over to the stairs instead.

"Calm down, Homura-chan," Madoka scolds her, not liking how anxious she's getting.

"O...kay."

Madoka pats her back, and Homura tries her best to calm herself down.

\\

They walk to the train station, and with their weekend passes in hand, they head to the platform for the train heading downtown.

It's a busy Saturday afternoon, and Homura drags Madoka to the compartment for women only passengers. As they wait in line, Madoka looks around curiously.

She gently tugs Homura's hand to gain her attention. "Homura-chan?"

"Hm...?"

"...We won't get in trouble, will we?"

Homura blinks. "Why would we?"

Madoka glances around them: most of the passengers are older.

"Oh." Homura shakes her head. "It... shouldn't be a problem. There are some schools that no longer have classes on Saturdays, and it's late enough in the day that people won't think twice about us not being in uniform."

Madoka looks doubtful. "Are you sure?" She knows they're garnering a few curious glances.

"Yes. Relax. The more you look around, the more suspicious you'll seem."

Madoka eyes Homura carefully. "...Is that also something you picked up?"

Lavender flickers to her briefly, but there's a chime overhead, announcing the approaching train.

As everyone faces forward, anticipating their boarding, Homura leans down to whisper into Madoka's ear, "we'll be fine."

Homura joins the crowd and stares ahead, but Madoka continues to watch her. She suddenly leans against her.

"...Madoka?"

She shakes her head, and waits with Homura as the doors open.

/

She turns over onto her back, trying to fall back asleep.

The empty pains in her stomach reminds her that Mami had woken up too late to make breakfast, and the few slices of toast she had eaten hadn't been enough. She grumbles and sits up.

She checks the clock: one more hour until Mami returns from her classes.

Meaning at least two hours until real food.

She flops back down, red hair pooling underneath her as she stares blankly at the ceiling above.

She's spent enough nights here that the sight is once again familiar. Almost like—

Her chest tightens, and she quickly pushes her thoughts down.

Her stomach grumbles once more, and this time she angrily sits up, throwing the thin blanket off her.

"Alright. Mami's taking forever. I'm sure I can—make something to eat..."

\\

It takes half an hour for them to reach their destination, and there's another half hour wait until they're finally seated.

Their table is right by the window, where they have a view of the streets down below as they eat.

"I'll be right back with your drinks," the waitress says as she politely bows.

"Thank you," Madoka gives her shy smile, watching as the waitress makes her way around the maze of booths to put in their order.

They had opted to sit together, and she can feel Homura tapping her leg as she eagerly waits for their order to be brought out.

She gently places a hand on Homura's arm. "Homura-chan. It'll be out soon enough."

Homura rumbles almost immediately in discontent, and she can just imagine how much Homura's ears are twitching underneath that hat. She leans closer, one hand now on Homura's leg to stop her from tapping her feet.

"Homura-chan."

"I'm—sorry," Homura says, nervously glancing down, and then back up. She forces her shoes flat to the ground.

"It's okay." Madoka unconsciously casts her eyes to the ceiling, trying to think of something to distract Homura with. "Homura-chan?"

Homura reaches forward, her hands now gripping a paper napkin in her hand. "Hm...?"

"About... today. Is it alright if I ask you where we're going...?"

Homura frowns lightly as her fingers move to roll torn pieces of paper into little balls. "It's..."

Madoka watches as she continues tearing the napkin apart. "How about ...we start planning things for tomorrow then...?"

Homura's hands immediately still. She glances to Madoka almost bashfully. "A... nywhere is fine with me," she murmurs. It's said soft enough that Madoka can only hear her because she's leaning so close. "As... as long as I'm with you..."

Madoka smiles shyly, her cheeks warming at Homura's words.

She can't say that she doesn't feel the same.

"...You mentioned SkyTree has a lot of things to do...?"

Homura nods, her hands now continuing their fidgeting from her nervousness. "The... area around it at least has shopping and an—aquarium. Restaurants... and... there's—also a... planetarium..." she tilts her head, "and—a museum inside...? But, uhm, it was—just a suggestion..."

Madoka hums. "Maybe when we get back to the hotel—I'll start looking for things to do. The—station at least seems like an interesting place to start."

Homura blinks suddenly and sits up, abandoning the scraps of paper for her phone. Her fingers move quickly, and after a few clicks, she tilts the screen over so that Madoka can see.

"We could, uhm, go... here...?"

"Hm?" Madoka leans in closer for a better look. She stares at the picture, quickly reading the title on the screen. Unable to stop herself, she reaches over to tap Homura's nose. "Would you like to go there, Homura-chan?"

Homura absently runs her tongue over her teeth, "...we'd have to wake up early though... but..."

Madoka grins at how torn Homura looks. "Which sounds better to you, Homura-chan? More sleep, or..." she glances to Homura's phone, "that...?"

Homura stares at the screen, and Madoka's sure that any second, Homura's going to start drooling.

"...If you can wake up, we can go," Madoka tells her.

Homura's lips dip into a frown. "I... can wake up."

Madoka raises her eyebrow. "Can you?"

She sees Homura's eyes flicker to the side. "Yes..."

"Don't even think about just staying up instead, Homura-chan. It's not healthy, and you need to get your rest."

Homura's mouth opens to protest, but she thinks twice about it, and closes her mouth. She instead scrolls through her phone, weighing the options in her mind.

Madoka is watching her, and notices when Homura's face falls.

"What's wrong?" Madoka leans forward, eyes searching the screen for the reason why Homura looks so sad.

"They're—not opened on Sundays..."

"Ah..." She gently takes the phone from Homura's hand and double checks the hours listed. "That's okay, Homura-chan. Look," she points to the screen, "we can go on Monday. We won't be going home until Tuesday, anyways."

Homura looks up, brightening a little. "We could..."

Madoka gives her a small hug. "We'll go somewhere else tomorrow—and return back to the hotel room a bit earlier so we can wake up on time on Monday, okay?"

"Okay..."

Madoka smiles, because Homura still looks so adoringly disappointed. Before she can say anything to cheer her up, Homura suddenly perks up. Madoka turns, and watches as their waitress approaches with a tray of drinks in her hand. When the woman walks past them to another table, Homura all but deflates against her.

Madoka slips her arm around Homura's waist. "Be patient, Homura-chan."

She can feel the vibrations of a low rumble from Homura's throat. She leans in closer.

"Homura-chan."

"...Okay."

/

She leans against the wall, eyes closed as she ignores the blatant stares thrown her way.

Usually, she blended in quite nicely into the crowds, but here, she knows she stands out like a bright red beacon, and it's starting to grate on her nerves.

Annoyed, she pushes off from the wall, eyes opening as she stretches her neck to peer into the school yard.

A few passing students cower at her expression, and a few more speed up as they walk past.

She ignores them, though her grumbling stomach only serves to add to her annoyance.

Truthfully, she had been on her way to indulge herself with fast food, but—without thinking about it, her feet had somehow lead her here instead.

Her eyes search for a familiar shade of blonde, though absently she's also looking for a certain shade of blue.

"...Sakura-san?"

She tilts her head back at the sound of her name, "yo, Seaweed girl."

Hitomi blinks in confusion. "...Are you—perhaps waiting for Tomoe-san?"

Kyouko smirks, and places her hands behind her head. "Maybe. Who knows."

"...Or, perhaps you're waiting for Sayaka-san?"

The smirk slides off Kyouko's face as her body stiffens. "Why—the hell would I be waiting for her?" she snarls out.

Hitomi tucks a few strands of hair behind her ear, seemingly unfazed to Kyouko's anger. "I was—merely inquiring—because Sayaka-san won't be out for a while. She's... currently a bit busy with the teacher."

Kyouko quirks an eyebrow. "What, she in trouble or something?"

"Ah," Hitomi hesitates, "in... a way, I suppose...?"

Kyouko frowns. "This isn't because she ditched school, right? I thought that was taken care of."

Hitomi stares at her curiously, enough that Kyouko wipes the concerned expression from her face.

"Uh, not like I'm worried, or anything." She scowls, and Hitomi wonders if she's trying to convince herself that.

"We... had a test earlier this week. Sayaka-san... scored a bit lower than the average."

Kyouko's face warps into a grin, and she's suddenly cackling loudly. "She failed? She failed one of her tests? Seriously? Figures that idiot would be an idiot in school too!"

Hitomi apologizes in her head to Sayaka for letting it slip. "Ah, she wasn't—that far off from passing—"

It only serves to make Kyouko laugh louder.

Hitomi looks around self-consciously, Kyouko's laugh now echoing in her ears, and drawing the attention of the other students as they exit. She all but freezes when a pair of brown eyes stare back at her.

Kyousuke gives her a smile that looks more like a grimace, before he turns away, and she's left staring at his back as he continues to walk down the street.

Kyouko sighs, scratching her head as she tries to pretend that she hadn't seen anything. She scowls, hating how soft she's getting.

She blames Mami for this.

She steps closer to throw her arm over Hitomi's shoulder—and feels a prick of annoyance when she has to tiptoe just a bit in order to do so.

Hitomi turns to her, startled at the contact.

Kyouko slips her usual smug smile across her face. "You busy?"

Hitomi blinks. "I... have flower arrangement classes this afternoon—"

"Now?"

"...At three. Why do you—"

"Cool. I'm hungry. Let's grab a bite to eat—my treat."

"Sakura-san—"

She drags Hitomi down to her height, and starts pulling her along.

After a few awkward stumbles, Hitomi easily pushes Kyouko off her and straightens to her full height.

"I—won't run, if that's what you're worried about." She brushes down her clothes almost haughtily, and Kyouko finds herself smirking.

"How does ramen sound?"

Hitomi is still staring—eyes hard—and definitely not as spineless as Kyouko figured her to be. "I have no qualms with ramen."

"Good. I know this place that serves this really delicious spicy miso."

Kyouko's judging her, and Hitomi knows this.

She smiles in return, eyes crinkling just a little at the edges, with a small flash of her teeth; just like her classes taught her. "I do love ramen that packs a punch. I hope it's as good as you say it is."

Kyouko grins in response, fangs now bared. "Wanna make a bet?"

\\

She carefully lines her shoes by the entrance, immediately noticing that a certain pair of boots are now missing.

A bit of disappointment is felt, but she quickly pushes it aside with practiced ease, and continues into her apartment.

Her dull footsteps seem louder today, and her eyes zero in on the messy blankets piled on the couch. If not for that, and the few empty candy wrappers lying around, she could be fooled into thinking that things haven't changed at all.

She pauses in front of the kitchen, suddenly fearful that Kyouko has left for good.

Just like before.

She shakes her head, trying to force her thoughts back.

"I should... make something to eat," she murmurs to herself, trying to fill the silence with her voice. "Maybe some cold noodles since it's starting to warm up..."

There's an empty pang as her voice fades, and no one replies.

She heads into the kitchen and makes a beeline for the refrigerator.

She stops short, and blinks when there's something unfamiliar pinned on the refrigerator door—a piece of scrap paper with messy writing scrawled on it.

'Went out—save me some lunch, and whatever else you're making -Kyou.'

The paper is carefully pulled off, and held close to her chest. Her eyesight blurs, and she bows her head, letting the tears freely trail down.

/

The flow of traffic is at times overwhelming, and if not for Homura's strong grip around her hand, she knows that they would've been separated a long time ago.

After almost losing Homura again, she attaches herself to Homura's back, trying to keep her head afloat amongst the buzzing crowd.

The one thing most noticeable about Tokyo are the busy streets, and the just as busy side walks. People here seem more hurried and rushed, and she has to lengthen her stride to keep up.

Homura stops walking, and she breathes a sigh of relief, catching her breath as the strangers around her wait for the light to turn green.

She's still pressed against Homura, and feels her body tense.

"Homura-chan?"

She's unsure if the other girl hears her, but Homura is suddenly pushing through the crowd, murmuring apologies as she rushes to cross the other intersection before the light turns red.

Madoka tries her best to keep up, and stumbles as her shoe drags along the pavement. A hand clamps down on her arm, and Homura catches her, pulling her close.

"I'm sorry—we need to hurry, Madoka," Homura murmurs into her ear, before she once again drags her along.

She's not given a chance to reply, but she can hear the urgency in Homura's voice. She pushes forward, sticking close to Homura as they weave in between the crowd.

They make a sharp turn, and their surroundings transition darker, to an alleyway with a jagged, bright outline of the sky that follows them overhead. She squints, her eyes trying to readjust as Homura expertly guides them through, footsteps light and sure footed.

Homura suddenly stops, and Madoka bumps into her.

"Sorry, Homura-chan."

Homura tilts her head, her eyes narrowing as she hears something rustling in the corner.

"Homura-chan...?" Madoka feels her heart thump loudly, and she gently places a hand on Homura's shoulder, "what's wrong?"

Homura jolts back, head now shaking as she tries to control her impulses. "S-Sorry." She fumbles for Madoka's hand again, and they continue towards the other side, this time at a slower pace.

Madoka glances over her shoulder, eyes searching, but unable to find anything hidden in the shadows.

She walks faster, matching Homura's now less hurried steps. She leans forward, trying to glimpse at Homura's face from beyond her hair; all she sees are the red frames as Homura keeps her head turned, evading Madoka's glances.

Sensing no immediately danger, she slowly relaxes, and intertwines their fingers together. Homura gives her a timid look, and she responds with a small smile, though it falters when the other girl lowers her head.

They remain quiet as they continue down the alley. Once they reach the end, the streets outside are no longer crowded, and there's a different kind of lingering buzz heard in their ears.

Madoka squints, once again letting her eyes readjust as Homura nervously fidgets beside her. They keep close to the walls, out of the way as a few people walk by.

She waits, until they're out of earshot. Finally, she turns to face her, "Homura-chan? What—was that?"

Homura averts her eyes, her one hand picking at her sleeve as Madoka holds her other hand. "N-Nothing. I just—heard, uhm, something familiar, b-but I wasn't—" she ducks her head, "I wasn't going to eat it..."

Madoka nods slowly; that merely confirmed her suspicions of what Homura had been listening to in the alley.

But—

She reaches out to readjust Homura's cap. "I meant, why—" she pauses, "...who were you running away from, earlier?"

Homura raises her head, eyes blinking behind her glasses. "Oh." She clears her throat, now absently rubbing her hand against her cheek. "There... I felt another magical girl's signature—"

Madoka tenses, but Homura shakes her head.

"We're—fine... I'm positive she wouldn't have been able to detect me, but I didn't want to take any chances."

Madoka relaxes ever so slightly. She glances around, and other than a nearby store clerk sweeping the entrance, the streets are relatively empty. "...Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"...Couldn't we... ask them to help us?"

Homura finally realizes what she's doing, and drops her hand. "Help...us?"

Madoka nods, turning to look at Homura. "They're—magical girls too, aren't they? We could—talk to them, and maybe work together somehow...?"

Homura remains quiet, reaching up to push down her cap so that the brim suddenly cuts off what Madoka can see of Homura's eyes.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura turns away, "...that—wouldn't be a good idea," she murmurs softly.

A horn honks in the background, and Madoka jumps, startled. She quickly looks around, and catches the back of a truck as it barrels on by. She watches as it disappears with a small trail of dust, before facing Homura once more.

"Did—it happen before? Did you—?"

One lone lavender eye peers at her; shaded, and maybe a bit darker than usual.

For some reason, a chill runs down her spine.

Homura turns away again. "...We should—continue to the train station."

Madoka grips her hand tightly. "Homura-chan? Please—"

Homura faces Madoka, gently holding her hands.

"Homura-chan...?"

"...Not everyone is as kind as you are, Madoka. You are—an exception—to..." she lowers her head, "everything in this world..."

Madoka blinks. Homura's eyes are still hidden by her cap, and Madoka forces herself to not angrily push it away. "I'm—not—"

Homura presses down on Madoka's hands, finally lifting her head, and showing her blank face, "...it—still wouldn't be a good idea. Let's—" she lets go, and turns around, "...we'll take the long way to the station."

Before she can take a step forward, Madoka snags Homura's jacket sleeve, pulling her, and forcing her to turn back around.

Madoka searches Homura's eyes, "...later, can you..." her mouth is dry, and she licks her lips, before pressing them into a thin line, "...I would like to know—everything, Homura-chan."

Homura is the first to break eye-contact. She pauses, and then lightly dips her head down. "...Okay."

Madoka squeezes her hand, and offers Homura a smile when she lifts her head. "Thank you."

Homura nods once more. She glances to the side. "Let's... go."

"Okay," she says softly, "lead the way, Homura-chan."

\\

Homura leans against Madoka, eyes closed as the train continues to their destination.

She's about ready to fall asleep, and Madoka's warmth isn't helping one bit.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka whispers into her ear. "You need to stay awake."

Homura nods sleepily. She knows if she falls asleep she's—probably going to do something embarrassing. She straightens up, barely resisting the temptation to shake her head.

"I'm up..."

Madoka nods, patting her hand, before she continues to stare out the window. The train route is following the shoreline, and there are short glimpses of the ocean at random intervals.

Maybe they could explore one of the areas by the bay tomorrow.

"Homura-chan?"

"Hm...?"

"Where—are we going...?"

She feels Homura lean against her once more. "We'll be there soon."

With nothing else to do, Madoka continues to stare outside. Her eyes widen when she sees a large structure slowly sliding into their view. She gently shakes Homura awake.

"Homura-chan. Homura-chan? Look."

Homura purrs lightly, and luckily, it's soft enough that only Madoka can hear. "Hmm...?" Her eyes crack open, unfocused, as she tries to locate what Madoka's pointing to.

"Maybe we can go there tomorrow..." Madoka murmurs, eyes still fixated on the large structure.

"...It lights up at night, I think," Homura tells her as she once again closes her eyes.

Madoka follows it with her eyes, head turning when the train starts moving past. She makes a mental note to maybe add that to their plans.

It isn't until she's straining her neck as the structure slowly grows smaller, before she finally turns the other way.

A sign catches her eye, and she blinks in confusion. She can't ask Homura about it because she's sleeping; she can tell by her gentle breaths, and the heavier weight against her.

Her brow furrows, and she wonders if it's just a coincidence.

/

She pushes away the empty bowl, finished with the complimentary ice cream given after their meal. Her accomplice is still slowly scooping the dessert into her mouth, absently staring past the counter as the workers go about their business.

"So."

Green flickers her way, maybe brighter than she had assumed, though that just may be the spices affecting her brain.

"You and uh... pret—uh, violin boy—how's that working out?"

Hitomi blinks, lowering her spoon into her bowl with a light clink. "Are... you referring to Kamijou-kun...?"

Kyouko gives a halfhearted shrug. "Sure, if that's his name."

Hitomi falls into silence, her gaze darting around as she mulls over Kyouko's question.

She eventually sighs, shoulders slouching. "How much do you know?"

Another lifted shoulder. "Enough."

"You... and Sayaka-san seem close."

Kyouko raises an eyebrow. "We aren't."

Hitomi gives her an empty smile. "Yet, you seem to know more about her lately than I do..."

"Whatever—we aren't. You haven't answered my question."

"Yes, well," Hitomi moves, reaching once more for her spoon, "unlike you and Sayaka-san, our relationship isn't quite as close. Unfortunately... strangers are not privy to my personal life."

Kyouko groans. "You're as stuck up as you appear."

"And you're as uncivilized as you appear," Hitomi counters. She sits up straight, her eyes now boring into Kyouko's. "How did you really meet Sayaka-san and Madoka-san? Are you—and Tomoe-san involved in something? Are you really waiting on your papers for your transfer? I'm on student council, but none of the teachers have mentioned another transfer student other than Akemi-san. Are you, perhaps, Sakura-san... a..."

Kyouko narrows her eyes. "A...?"

"A..." her voice drops to a whisper, "delinquent?"

To her surprise, Kyouko bursts out laughing, the sound sharp and loud in her ears. They're given a few curious looks, and Hitomi lowers her head self-consciously.

"A... delinquent," Kyouko echoes her, repeating it in the same way.

She slaps her knee as the laughter continues, and Hitomi tries her best to make herself seem smaller. Eventually, her laugh slows down into a sigh, and she takes a moment to wipe away her amused tears.

"I don't even know why I'm still here—you rubbed me the wrong way the first time I met you—and you're still rubbing me the wrong way."

Her boots hit the floor, but a strong hand on her wrist stops her from standing. "Sakura-san."

She turns, her crimson eyes now narrowed slits.

Hitomi flinches, but doesn't let go. "Do you—know what's wrong with Sayaka-san? With... Madoka-san?"

An insult is on the tip of her tongue, but something she sees written in Hitomi's face, has her once again sighing.

She also blames Mami for this.

She heavily drops back down to her seat, and stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets. "...You ever wake up in the middle of the night, so hungry that your stomach feels like it's eating you alive from the inside?"

Hitomi hesitantly withdraws her hand. Her mouth opens, and then shuts close. "...No. Have... you, Sakura-san?"

Kyouko ignores her question, watching as the chef in the kitchen scoops out a ladle full of soup, and pours it into a large ceramic bowl. Her stomach grumbles, but not with hunger, and the lingering taste of peppers and chiles on her tongue reminds her of their spicy meal finished just a bit ago.

"...The point is," she continues, eyes still watching the kitchen, "you got your own life, and—Blueberry and Pinky have their own." She tilts her head back, "you don't tell them everything about your life, do you?"

Hitomi has the decency to look away.

"...You didn't even tell Sayaka that you had the hots for the same guy—"

Hitomi's eyes widen as she turns back. "That was—"

"'All's fair in love and war,' right?"

"I—"

Kyouko stands and this time there's no protest from Hitomi. She turns around and points a finger at her. "You—have a pretty cushy life. Don't go biting off more than you can chew."

She walks away as Hitomi remains seated, face baffled at her words. She doesn't even realize that Kyouko has left without paying until the waitress sets down a plastic tray in front of her.

She sighs, and reaches for her phone.

\\

Madoka smiles, watching as a family passes by, all four of them wearing matching hats. She can picture her own family doing the same, and she'd be lying if she said she doesn't miss them.

But—

She turns to face Homura, who's still absently staring at nothing; Madoka wonders if she's lost in her memories.

She tilts her head up: blue skies, with scattered clouds. There's laughter, and occasional cuts of conversations heard as new groups of people cross their path.

A small sigh escapes, before she gently bumps Homura's shoulder. "Homura-chan?"

"Hm...?"

"Are you okay...?"

Homura turns, suddenly burying her face into Madoka's neck. "I don't know..."

Madoka slips her arm around Homura's waist, ignoring, and not caring of any curious onlookers. "Did... you come here with your mother—before...?"

Homura shakes her head. "No..."

"You—didn't...?"

Homura absently rubs her head against Madoka's neck. Madoka immediately reaches for her hat, barely managing to keep it from slipping off.

"Homura-chan—your hat—"

"Sorry..."

Madoka tips it back into place, and Homura pulls away once she's done.

"I—only remember asking my parents to take me here. I don't—remember anything else, really... Just..." Homura glances down to her lap, her hands curling in, "...she promised me she'd take me here one day, w-when I got better..."

Madoka closes her eyes, breathing in through her nose as she clenches her jaw.

She opens her eyes, and carefully places her hands over Homura's. "We're here now, Homura-chan. Let's—make the most out of it, okay? There's still a good amount of time left before it closes."

Homura lifts her head, and Madoka gives her a smile.

"We'll make our own memories here, Homura-chan."

She nods hesitantly. "...O...kay."

Madoka stands, and pulls Homura to her feet. "Let's go, Homura-chan. First things first—we'll need to get you another hat."

Homura blinks, one hand moving to press down her cap. "Another one...?"

Madoka nods, and points towards the shop to their left. "Something that fits this place more, though..." she grins, "your ears kind of fit already."

Homura looks around, eyes searching, evaluating the other guests. Maybe a bit more than half have something resting on their heads.

"I'm—okay with this," she says softly. "You—should buy one if you want, Madoka."

Madoka frowns. "It's—one of the rules, Homura-chan. When you go to an amusement park, you have to buy a hat—it's for the full experience!"

Homura grips her cap tightly. "I'm—okay."

Madoka pauses, trying to figure out why Homura seems so reluctant. "Is... there a reason why you don't want a different hat, Homura-chan? They have—really cute ones that'll look adorable on you!"

Homura ducks her head, still holding onto her cap. Her voice is quiet—shy, and Madoka has to strain to hear her over the background noises:

"B-Because... this was picked—by you... and, earlier, you—bought me milk too, but—but," she shyly looks up, "...this—is the first thing you—have ever given me..."

Madoka feels something tighten around her chest as something builds behind her eyes. She reaches forward to hug Homura close.

As she fights back the tears, she resolves to buy as many things as possible for Homura on this trip. "How about—we buy some matching sweaters or something instead?"

Homura gulps. "Match—matching sweaters...?"

Madoka grins, pulling away to link arms with Homura. "Yes. Matching sweaters," she repeats.

When there's no response, Madoka all but drags Homura over to the gift shop.

/

Before she can help it, her chin slips off her hand, and she's startled awake as she barely catches herself from slamming her face into her desk.

"Argh..." She shakes her head, and just for good measure, slaps her cheeks, trying to wake herself up.

She gives a disheartened glance to the papers and to the opened workbook on her desk; the only thing stopping her from hopping into her bed to take a nap, is the crumpled sheet buried inside her book bag.

Somehow, she had managed to dodge questions during lunch, and if she can make it until next week without her mother finding out—and hopefully pass the make-up test along the way, then she'll be fine.

She once again places her chin on her hand, her eyes half closed as she glances to the calendar on her desk.

Walpurgisnacht will be arriving in another week, and she's here, at home, working on her homework instead of—doing something.

She groans loudly, pushing away from her desk.

Maybe she'll take a quick walk to the kitchen to clear her mind.

/Sayaka/

She freezes, eyes widening.

/May I come in?/

She turns to her window, to where Kyuubey sits, swishing that white tail of his as his beady red eyes stare at her.

She snarls, and stomps towards him. She fumbles with the latch for a moment, before the window is thrown open. "What do you want?!"

He moves to hop inside, but her arm stops him.

"You're not welcomed here. Leave."

He sits back onto his haunches, blinking once. /I have a few things I would like to discuss with you/

She crosses her arms, glaring. "Yeah? Well I have nothing left to say to you!"

/I noticed you took my advice—your powers seem to be quite powerful despite your lower potential—/

She swings her fist, and he dodges it easily. "Shut up! Because of you—Madoka—"

/If utilized correctly, you could perhaps use it as your main attack—/

She whirls around, hands reaching for his neck. "Shut up already!"

He dodges once more. /You seem upset—I merely answered the questions you had asked—/

"Unless you can tell me how—I can reverse what I did—I don't need any more answers from you!"

He tilts his head. /Reverse the effects? Do you perhaps mean the damage done to Akemi Homura's heart?/

She digs her fingers into her palm, ignoring the small jabs of pain from her nails. "Yes—"

/Things are easier to destroy than to repair. If it is another ally you seek, it would be more efficient to let Akemi Homura perish, and have Kaname Madoka replace her. She is much more powerful—/

She slams her hand into the window pane, and the frame rattles dangerously. She grits her teeth. "Shut up. You're not getting Madoka—and Homura—isn't replaceable. If you can't help me, then leave."

/You do not wish to hear me out/

She laughs, a sharp bark that echoes in her room. "Are you kidding me? Haven't you done enough?"

/...Even if I have news of one of your... human acquaintances?/

She draws her hand back, immediately thinking of Madoka. "...What—do you mean?"

Kyubey closes his eyes, tail once again swishing behind him. /Surely you have noticed the increased activity of Witches lately?/

She frowns. "Y-Yeah. What about it?"

/With the approaching arrival of Walpurgisnacht, it seems that Mitakihara has become an epicenter of Witch activity. And, while it's true that Witches appear more during the darker hours, there are bound to be anomalies, more so because of the influx of concentrated energy in this city/

"...What are you trying to say?"

He lifts his back leg, scratching his ear almost absently as he opens his eyes. /Some Witches are getting stronger—and can venture away from their usual haunts. You are friends with... Shizuki Hitomi?/

She feels a chill run down her back. "H-Hitomi?"

/As we speak, there are some humans being influenced by a Witch's kiss; she has unfortunately been caught/

Her hand darts out and she now holds Kyubey by the neck. "WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME THIS EARLIER? WHERE IS SHE?"

/I can lead you to her, if you would like/

She quickly glances out the window: the streets seem empty. Without thinking twice about it, she throws her leg over the window sill, secretly glad that she had changed clothes earlier.

"This better not be a trick, or else." One last look, before she pushes off.

There's a brief bit of weightlessness, and just like Kyouko had taught her, she reinforces her legs with magic to soften her landing.

She lands, crouched, and immediately uses the energy from the fall to roll forward, and then hop to her feet.

"Lead the way," she tells Kyubey, throwing him into the air, "and don't even think about pulling something!"

He lands on his feet, and turns to face her. /Follow me, Sayaka/

He takes off running, and she quickly chases after hi**m.**

AN: Well,,,,, the update was sort of, in the week, kind of.

It's been a year+! since I first uploaded this story,,, and, cat's cradle is still chugging along, somehow... very slowly...!

It has definitely spiraled into something larger than I thought it would have, and I definitely didn't think I'd be up to 26 (27 including the prologue) chapters, with this large word count... it's...

Well, I'm not even sure how frequent the updates will continue to be, actually. I would like to say a month, but—again, I don't know. I have a few ideas leading up the ending, but at this moment, I'm not sure which path to take...

Thank you for reading / reviewing / sticking with this story for so long. Until next time...

Chapter 28: dreamland part 2

AN: Wiiiiiiuwiiuwiiiiiu (the sound of sirens, or perhaps just the video game system)

I just wanted to remind you that any and all warnings that apply to PMMM also apply to this story.
Think very long and hard what I mean about that.

She glances to the side, quick to look away again before the other girl can notice.

Her one hand rests on her wrist, fingers absently fidgeting with the chain of her new bracelet. Another glance, and seeing the gleam of metal around Madoka's wrist makes her face warm. She ducks her head, trying her best to keep from smiling too widely.

The visit to the shop had been almost overwhelming, and after a few hesitant stammers, she had convinced Madoka on something simpler than a pair of matching sweaters; something subtler, and something they could wear more often.

Her fingers spins the bracelet round again; it's an unfamiliar sensation, but somehow, still comforting.

She allows herself a small smile, before focusing her attention once more on Madoka. Her face seems to glow with excitement as she pores over the map, pink eyes flickering left and right as she plans their itinerary.

The atmosphere of the amusement park seems to spark something in the air; it's contagious. Homura barely keeps her tail in check, instead twitching her ears, fingers spinning the bracelet as she continues to watch Madoka whisper quietly to herself—names of places that sound like fairy tales.

Madoka suddenly lifts her head, showing off the dust of colour on her cheeks as she gives a sheepish smile.

"Sorry, Homura-chan, I got a bit carried away." She pushes the paper closer, sharing it between the both of them, "is there anywhere you'd like to go?"

Homura moves to shake her head, but blinks, and turns to the pamphlet, eyes roving around the map. She knows what she's looking for, but has no idea where it would be located; even a check to the key has her frowning in slight confusion.

Madoka scoots closer, sidling against her. A glance up and pink eyes stare back.

"Are you looking for something specific?"

She returns her gaze to the paper, remaining quiet for a few moments. Finally, she gives a hesitant nod. "It's..." her voice trails off as she turns shy, embarrassed for wanting to do something so childish.

Madoka leans closer, "Homura-chan?"

She reaches up, her hand pressing and flattening the cap on her head. "Is... there a carousel, somewhere...?" she asks softly.

Madoka smiles. "Yes, I know there's one here somewhere..." She quickly scans through the map. "Here!" she proudly declares, her finger pointing to one of the sections. "It's right in the next area!" Before Homura can react, Madoka is standing, and pulling the other girl up with her. "Let's go, Homura-chan!"

Homura doesn't resist, hand linked with Madoka's, and she's given a grin, before she's dragged forward.

She hangs back, walking behind Madoka as they weave through the crowds, sidestepping the many families that block their way.

As they wait for a particularly large group to pass, Madoka tilts her head back, throwing a glance over her shoulder.

Homura shyly smiles, and she smiles back.

\\

Feet pound on pavement as her heart hammers loudly in her chest.

A gulp of air, before she carries on, ignoring the reactions to her frantic dash across the city as she chases after a white blur that no one else can see.

She can only think of the things she wants to say—apologies, and underneath that, another voice sneers and makes her stomach twist with guilt.

What if she doesn't—

She pushes herself faster, overshooting enough that suddenly she's running side by side with Kyuubey.

"Move faster!" she yells, voice desperate and cracking at the last syllable.

/You are expending your magic at an alarming rate, Sayaka/

"MOVE!"

He leaps further, and she follows suit.

"Please be okay. Please be okay, Hitomi."

/

She walks like she's floating; on her tiptoes, without hesitation in her steps.

She has cram school to attend, and though it's faint, she can hear and feel the vibrations of her phone in her school bag. Her parents, no doubt, wondering why she missed her earlier lessons, maybe wanting—demanding an explanation.

Her steps slow, and though her mind is clouded, she knows how disappointed they will be, knows that they expect so much better from her.

'*It's okay. There are days when you don't have to be perfect; you deserve a break, too.*'

Her hand stops, and she's no longer reaching for her bag. She lets her arm drop back to her side.

She nods, feeling the pressure in her chest lightening: where she's going, she won't have to be perfect at all.

Down the street, and she meets with another; he's older, business suit and tie, yet she can recognize the smile on his face.

"A requiem for us all," he whispers, his own footsteps haphazard as he shambles forward.

She smiles wider.

\\

"Is there something wrong?"

She ignores the question, too focused on wrapping and tangling her chains around the struggling familiar. She pulls the binds taut, and at the same time, pumps magic into her arms, increasing her strength.

Mami winces, lightly frowning as the chains constrict, until there's a splatter of coloured dust as the familiar dies.

"Kyouko."

Again, she's ignored as Kyouko turns around, eyes narrowed as she tries to find another familiar. She pauses: the alleyway is empty.

"Kyouko." A touch on her shoulder makes her jump. Her arm smacks Mami's hand as she whirls to face her, spear brandished and ready for a fight.

Mami holds her hands up, though her surprise slowly wipes clean as her eyebrows furrow in worry.

"Is something the matter? You seem... unusually anxious today."

Kyouko spins round again, her hair flowing along like a crimson wave. Before it can settle, she glows red, and changes back into her regular street clothes with a flash.

"Nah." Her soul gem appears in her palm. "Let's continue hunting. We keep hitting up the small fries; I'd actually like a challenge for once."

Mami sighs, and returns to her school uniform. "Very well, let's—" she frowns.

Kyouko quirks an eyebrow, one foot tapping in impatience. "What's up?" Her hands itch for something to eat, but she already knows her pockets are empty.

Mami turns her head, eyes closed as she concentrates. Curious, Kyouko holds out her soul gem, but there's no tell-tale flash of light.

Just as sudden, Mami's eyes fly open. "Sayaka...?"

Kyouko gives her a confused look. "What about her?"

Mami shakes her head. "Her magical signature—I'm positive it's her. She's—" her eyebrows shoot up, "moving almost as quickly as Akemi-chan can...?"

"The hell is she doing?" Kyouko mutters. Her gem returns to her finger as she looks at Mami expectantly. "Well, what are you waiting for? Shouldn't we go after her?"

They exchange a look, before they give chase.

/

"Homura-chan?" Madoka's voice is soft against her ear, but she remains facing forward, her eyes watching as the carousel slowly spins.

Animals of all shapes and strange colours rise and fall, each one carrying its passenger as the ride continues it's revolution; once, twice, long enough for children to wave to their parents as their parents wave back.

"It's the first time I've ever seen one in person..." Homura tilts her head up, eyes trailing along the elaborate decorations. She glances around. "...There's, ah, a lot of little kids in line..."

"Hm?" Madoka turns her head from side to side. "It's fine." She subtly nods in front of them. "There are some adults too." She smiles, taking Homura's hand. "Theme parks are one of those places where age doesn't matter, Homura-chan."

Homura gives a hesitant nod. "I... suppose."

\\

She claps in excitement, joining in the round of applause and listening as the sound carries in the abandoned warehouse.

Pale light streams from glass windows, casting long shadows that stretch to the furthest walls of the room. She turns as she hears the slow scrape of plastic on wood: an older woman dragging a bucket along the dusty wooden floor.

Their arranged circle is now complete, and everyone waits as the designated leader slowly pours liquid into the bucket.

Tension hangs in the air; anticipation that brings a dazed smile to her lips.

Plastic is thrown to the floor—a loud clatter—

/

—as she leans heavily on the chain-linked fence, struggling to catch her breath.

Her lungs burn, and chest still heaving, she pushes away, the sound of metal rattling barely heard over her frantic breathing.

An expectant glance to Kyuubey, and he continues down the empty streets, his backward glances only spurning her forward, faster.

The buildings looming ahead gives her a destination, and she leaps forward—

\\

—landing lightly on her feet. There's a sense of urgency as they scale the rooftops; Sayaka's trail is brighter, yet there's something else mixed with blue: they've both fought long enough to recognize that feeling.

She increases her speed, and as if on cue, senses Mami doing the same.

Even without looking, she knows Mami's expression mirrors her own.

Lips pressed into a thin line, eyes narrowed—

/

—as she tries to pinpoint the clearest path to the entrance.

"She's—" she swallows heavily, trying to push her words out despite her parched throat, "where is she? Why is it taking so long?!"

/I was keeping track of the Witch, and I can guarantee it is in the vicinity. However, there are a numerous amounts of false barriers that are interfering with my sensors. The Witch has not fully awakened, which makes it more difficult to detect/

She growls, teeth grit in anger; of course Kyuubey would have trouble right at the last minute.

Thinking quickly, she summons her gem into her hand. It shines brightly—the jewel reacting no matter what direction she turns to.

"Don't worry, Hitomi, I'll—" she flashes blue, quickly summoning her swords into her hands. Her fingers tighten around the hilt, and she feels the comfort of cold steel, "I'll definitely save you. Please be safe. Just—a little bit more."

\\

"Please remain seated while the ride is in motion."

She glances around, cheeks lightly flushed as she grips the pole tightly; even with Madoka's reassurance, the majority of the riders are young children.

"Homura-chan?"

She turns to the familiar voice, and Madoka smiles at her from her seat: it's a pink rabbit.

"Are you okay?"

She nods hesitantly.

Madoka looks up, eyes growing nostalgic as she stares at the ceiling of the carousel. "The carousel used to be my favourite ride when I was younger." She smiles, facing Homura once more. "Just relax, okay? No one's really looking."

They hear giggles nearby, and kids shouting just as the ride starts moving.

The sudden movement startles her, and she digs her knees into the plastic horse, knuckles whitening when bright music plays overhead. She glances around, self-conscious, but the only eyes on her are Madoka's.

"Relax, Homura-chan."

She nods, loosening her grip around the safety pole.

"Okaa-san! Look! Look over here!"

She turns around, watching as a little girl waves to her parents. They smile, camera held out, arms waving just as frantically.

Their faces blur—

But they don't sharpen, because she realizes she doesn't remember what they look like —not anymore.

She turns away, concentrating instead in front of her.

Madoka's smile slowly drops when she glances over and realizes that Homura isn't having fun. She bites her lip in worry, and after another moment, she slides off her seat, ignoring the attendant's previous warnings.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura flinches when a hand is placed on her leg. She turns to Madoka, head tilted in confusion. "...Madoka?"

Madoka smiles, standing besides her as the carousel continues its round. "I didn't want to ride by myself the first time, so I made Papa stand right by me."

Homura blinks. "Ah... but..."

Madoka holds out her hand, still smiling.

"...Thank you."

Her hand is shaking, and Madoka grips it tightly. "Don't worry, Homura-chan, I'm right here."

Their fingers link together. It's comforting, as it should be, but—

She shivers as a small chill runs down her back.

A glance to her side—

"Homura-chan?"

She blinks, and then shakes her head. "I'm okay..."

/

She's light headed, body teetering as she wavers on her feet. Painful coughs rack her body; her chest hurts; her throat burns. When she turns her head to see how the others are faring, her vision spins right before her legs buckle.

She falls, tumbling clumsily to the floor. She lays there for a few moments, feeling the roughness of floorboards against her skin as she struggles to draw in a breath. Something tickles her cheek, and her eyes blink open sleepily. More touches, and she finally summons the strength to roll over. As she stares above her, a delirious smile spreads across her face.

"Have you come to take us away?" she murmurs softly, her hands reaching up for the numerous white angels that hover above. She falters, coughing once more.

Through her painful haze, colours flash as small voices giggle into her ear. A TV screen in her view; static, and faces that slowly sharpen: a familiar blue; a familiar grey.

The world turns abstract as shapes of all sizes surround her. Feather light touches on her limbs as wooden fingers grasp on tightly. She raises her head, breathing ragged, watching as the angels flutter in separate directions; feels the pull of muscle and bone. Her body stretches and contorts, bending, expanding—

There's one last glance—one last look—and a familiar smile is the last thing she sees as her eyes close shut.

\\

She slashes in front of her, not even stopping to make sure that her target is dead as she takes off running. Screens in the background are grey, and each one she passes flashes with pictures of her life; memories mocking her as she dashes across.

It only serves to make her move faster, and she easily dodges two more feeble attempts to stop her; two more slashes as she continues her fast paced run.

"Where is she?!" Her voice is loud, desperate. She searches in front of her, trying to distinguish white and red from the colours in the background.

/We are almost there/

She sucks in a breath, trying to force more oxygen into her lungs. Her head is pounding, and she can feel something straining inside her chest—a deep, empty pain.

She takes a moment, before she cuts off the connection to her soul gem, feeling relief when the pain quickly disappears. She ignores the heaviness in her legs as her numb fingers grip her swords.

"Hitomi! Wait for me! I'll definitely save you!"

/

The carousel is to their backs, and they now sit on one of the planters nearby. Homura has fallen into silence, and Madoka holds her closely as she watches the crowd.

"Homura-chan?" More silence, and she tilts her head to the side, already knowing a blank face will greet her. Her hand presses into Homura's back, and she feels her shift, eyes blinking slowly, as if rousing from wherever she had disappeared into.

"Sorry," Homura murmurs softly. She shakes her head, lifting her glasses with one hand, while dragging the other over her face.

Madoka watches her for a moment longer. She keeps her hand on Homura's back, letting Homura lean on her.

"Did you want to talk about it?"

Homura tenses, and Madoka gently rubs her back, trying to ease the tension away.

There's screaming to their side, followed by laughter and murmurs in the background. She tunes them out, turning to Homura who once again deliberately has the brim of her cap lowered, letting the shadow cover her eyes.

Madoka reaches over, pushing the hat up, giving herself a view of turbulent lavender as Homura tries to fight down her emotions.

Her arm slips around Homura's waist, "Homura-chan?" Her voice is soft, but she knows that Homura can hear her.

Slowly, Homura reluctantly faces her, eyes darting to the side to avoid those sharp pink eyes.

She exhales slowly. "Not—"

Fingers press down, and the words catch in her throat when she sees Madoka's eyes narrow.

A small whine escapes as her ears flatten, and this time, she turns her head away in shame. "I can't... I don't remember what she looks like—" her voice drops to a whisper, "I don't remember them—" she cuts herself off, reminders of her past making her whole body hurt. She closes her eyes, sucking in a painful breath. "I can't picture them standing off to the side, waving at me—because—it would never happen..."

That comforting hand is once again on her back, Madoka still against her side. "Shh, it's okay, Homura-chan."

Her other arm wraps around Homura's thin body, and she brings her closer, hugging her tightly.

\\

At the last second, the dashing hero bursts through the doors, cape billowing behind them. Sword drawn, they rush in, and against all odds, they defeat the enemy with one earth shattering blow.

She can picture it all in her head, and maybe it's what she's been anticipating ever since she understood—learned about fairy tales, and heroes.

Ever since she had first heard about being a magical girl.

She can remember golden light surrounding her, how it had wiped away her fear, and turned it into admiration. Remember the realization that she too, could be a real hero.

But—

A darkened room, and the only thing she can hear now is her heavy breathing.

Silence, and—

She angrily swipes at her upper brow, blaming the droplets of sweat as the reason why her eyes sting.

Beyond this floor should be the last boss, and with her, the captured Hitomi that she needs to save.

Beyond—

Her hand slackens, and the clang of metal on wood is heard as she quickly clamps her hand over her mouth. The smell of chemicals burns her throat, and she blindly reaches for her cloak, grasping at the cloth desperately, bringing it to cover her mouth to somehow block out the stench.

/The Witch is escaping, Sayaka/

She rears on him, the anger building pressure behind her eyes. "SHUT UP!" She grips her head, fingers tightening, bunching threads of hair in between them. "It—wasn't supposed to be like this..."

/It is unfortunate that we were too late, but if you do not give chase, it will claim more victims/

Her knees buckle together. "Shut up. Shut up! Shut up! *Shutupshutup*!" Her legs give way, knees the first to hit the floor. She curls her body in, "no—no—it—wasn't supposed to end up like this...!"

/...You were having troubles with her, were you not, Sayaka?/

Her eyes sharpen into a piercing glare.

/This is why humans are so irrational; with her no longer here, are you not able to pursue the reason for your wish now, Sayaka?/ Kyubey shakes his head. /It is truly difficult to understand you all. If you will not go after this Witch, then there is no reason for me to be here/

No longer listening, Sayaka turns away from him, her eyes picking out what she can see in the room. A large bucket, and plastic bottles littered to the side. Around that—

Her hands clamp around her mouth once more, eyes closing as the tears spill out.

\\

They're mid fight, weapons drawn and closing in for the kill when the air grows heavier, enough that even the familiars seem to still in fright.

She pauses, feeling that shift, but the silence breaks with rapid footsteps, and she turns her head, watching as a trail of crimson shoots across the room.

"Kyou—" she steps back, eyes narrowed as an artificial angel swoops down. Her wrist pivots, twisting the musket, and with split second aim, the barrel is aligned just as the trigger pulls.

Before the crack of the shot is finished, the discarded weapon clatters to the floor as her legs pump forward, one hand summoning more muskets at her fingertips. The drain of her magic is miniscule, and more shots are fired as she hurries to catch up to her companion.

Red and blue mix, a bright beacon beyond one more step; through a shattered screen, and static rings loudly, drowning her senses. Black and white snow falling—the walls flicker, and sudden images sharpen into recognizable faces.

"I'm so sorry, Hitomi." Haunted blues as snippets show—

Her eyes widen, watching as colours flood the screen. A frenzied dance; a small celebration; the scenes as the world falls. Liquid, thick and heavy; red, the colour of—

Her eyes close shut, tongue pressed to the roof of her mouth to keep the bile down. A fervid swallow, wincing as she hears the sound of tearing—

Her eyes snap open, hands moving and trigger pulled; one bullet, and the room is now empty.

The weapon falls, discarded, as she turns in fear.

"Sayaka!"

/

The sun sits lower now, resting on the cusp of evening as sunset hovers near.

A soft sigh as idle eyes wander. Up, down, and finally back to her side. Her lips twitch at the sight, and her fingers reach forward to gently brush the stray bangs from Homura's face. Curious lavender swings her way—deep, and still guarded.

Her fingertips linger, light touches on pale skin, lit with flames she knows only she can feel.

"...Madoka?"

"Hm...?"

Nervousness creeps in—she can recognize the tone and how Homura is suddenly stiff against her.

"Is... there something on my face?"

She watches as Homura rubs the back of her hand against her cheek, feels the loss as contact is broken. She smiles as Homura continues her actions, her other hand rubbing her other cheek for that imaginary blemish on her face.

"Did—I get it?"

Her body relaxes as she leans against Homura.

The spell is not broken—it's cast too deep, roots dug in too far—but she doesn't care.

"Madoka...?"

She smiles, facing the nervous girl with the uncertain gaze; ignoring the memory that doubles in her vision. "Are you feeling better now, Homura-chan?"

A light nod as shy eyes look away. "I'm... sorry. For, uhm, reacting that way..."

She hums lightly, her hands gripping her drink as she casts her eyes once more skyward. "Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

There's questions she wants to ask, things she desperately wants to know. She turns her head, eyesight lowering as Homura waits for the words to drop.

Her mouth opens, and she lifts her hand, holding up her drink. "Did you want my milk?"

Homura's eyes widen slightly, obviously caught off guard. She blinks, but the milk offered has her tongue darting out as she licks her lips.

"You, uhm, don't want yours...?"

She shakes her head, hands already moving to transfer the item into Homura's. "No, you can have it." She pats her hands once, before letting go. "I'm starting to get a bit hungry though... let's find something to eat too."

"Okay..."

She doesn't move, instead watching as Homura hastily starts drinking her newly acquired milk.

She smiles, leaning back into the bench. "After you're done."

/

Each step echoes, ringing in her ears like deafening silence; her chest rises and falls, each breath heard as she approaches ever closer.

The white of Sayaka's cape shines brightly even in darkness; a glint of gold, and crimson that glances her way.

Tentative steps, slowly bringing her closer.

Her breaths still, and suddenly she's right behind them, a mere hand's reach away.

"Sayaka?" It's a soft whisper, a word that barely escapes her tongue.

Kyouko's hand tightens, gripping those shaking shoulders; neither girl notices, but it's enough to distract Mami momentarily.

Kyouko's voice rings out: loud and clear, jarring Mami from her thoughts.

"Look, Mami's here," Kyouko leans down, her fingers now digging as she tries to rouse Sayaka awake. "She can—she can— this—" she turns, eyes shining desperately, seeking guidance—

Mami flinches as if physically struck; the air is heavier now, and she fears if moves too fast, the final lifeline will snap.

Mouth dry, she steps forward, using a shaky hand to clasp Sayaka's other shoulder.

"Sayaka?" She draws near, eyes peering to catch a glimpse of the other girl's face.

"Mami-san..."

The acknowledgement has her taking another step. "I'm right here, Sayaka."

Sayaka turns, showing off her swollen eyes and tear stained face; most noticeable is the smudge of dirt on her chin. "Mami-san—" her lips quiver, eyes closing shut, "can you—save her?" she croaks out.

"'Her?'" Mami repeats.

Clothes shifts, and her gaze lowers as Sayaka lifts her arms—

She freezes, feeling her stomach drop and churn as she understands the stain on Sayaka's chin.

Sayaka holds out her arms, "Mami-san? You—" wide, blue eyes open—dull against the pale light, "—you can save her, right? *Right*?"

Her eyes dart around, mouth moving though no sounds escape. Her throat burns when Sayaka leans over, her no longer white gloves gently stroking the object in her arms.

"It's—okay, Hitomi. Mami-san is here. S-She'll help you." A ring of musical notes are on her fingertips, flickering, and then fading as Sayaka collapses forward, sobbing uncontrollably. "My magic—won't work—why WON'T IT WORK!"

Alarmed, Mami kneels as she tries to get Sayaka to sit up. "Sayaka, please—she—"

Stained hands grip her shirt, dark red smearing on white. "Mami-san—"

The air is almost unbearable, and she knows that Sayaka is seconds away from falling. Her ribbons are summoned, winding up and forming into familiar shapes.

Her hands are moving, gripping solid steel, one finger extended against the trigger.

A shine of blue sinking deeper into black—the sound of glass shattering, a lifeless body falling as the light fades from their eyes—

Crimson shards—

A sharp inhale as she falters—

"What are YOU DOING?"

She falls as a heavy weight shoves her aside. Unprepared, the gun slips from her hands as she tumbles onto her back. She quickly sits up, scrambling to find it when she hears the rattle of metal.

Eyes wide in fear, she turns. "Kyou—"

She winces, hearing the sickening crack as Kyouko's fist swings hard, connecting bone to bone. Sayaka is sent spiraling to the floor, the momentum of Kyouko's hit leaving her a good distance away. As she lies there, dazed, both Mami and Kyouko move for her.

Kyouko reaches her first, and it's then that Mami notices the grief seed in her hand as she quickly grasps Sayaka with her other hand.

"Show me your gem!" she snarls, her fingers digging into cloth as she shakes Sayaka for emphasis.

"She's..." Sayaka murmurs, eyes unfocused as she teeters on the very edge.

"She's dead," Kyouko finishes for her, voice flat. "She's dead—and all those other people are dead."

"Kyou—"

"There's nothing you can do about it—no matter how much you cry, it won't bring them back! Show me your soul gem! NOW! What good will it do us if you die too, Sayaka?!"

Limp in Kyouko's hands, Sayaka cranes her neck, peering beyond the two hunched figures as their words fall on deaf ears. She finally spots what she's looking for—lying just a bit away. She attempts to reach for Hitomi, but her body is unresponsive. Her eyes slowly move, until they focus on the shaking figure in front of her—Kyouko.

"Kyouko...?"

"Show me your soul gem you idiot!" Her voice cracks. "Hurry!"

"Remember, you asked me... what makes a hero, a hero...?"

Hands grip her shoulder, the pressure barely felt even though she's sure Kyouko is pressing hard enough to break bones.

"We—can talk about this later—" Kyouko chokes out.

"Heroes..." she swallows once, throat parched dry, "...never call themselves heroes."

Crimson eyes widen at the bitter smile that stretches across cracked lips.

"I... really am an idiot," she sighs.

"Saya—!"

A lone tear trails down, right before she feels something shatter in her chest. Both Mami and Kyouko shield their faces as a wave of wind bursts from Sayaka's body. Even with her legs reinforced with magic, Kyouko is pushed back, body lifting as the tornado of air continues.

She braces herself, remembering how small the room is, but before she can crash into the wall, yellow ribbons encircle her, and snag her back to the ground. A quick side glance: Mami has ground herself to the floor using Kyouko's spear as an anchor.

The background cracks into pieces, and they watch as colours of red, black, and brown blend together.

The world dips, drops down as a black wave washes over them—splashing down heavily, submerging them in a world of water.

Muffled music in their ears, and the scenery finally reemerges as a stage rises, carrying a blue and white conductor—plated metal on scales—visor pulled down, blocking out her face.

Crimson eyes stare—she reaches with her hands, stretching out to the girl hidden behind that—

She's pulled roughly, hand on her wrist, tightly wound, fingers like chains—

And they both stumble, one foot in front of the other; she follows, but cranes her head to look back—

Her throat closes as a familiar shade of green catches her eye—as girls dance round and round.

"*Kyouko*!" a hushed whisper, the voice wobbly—wavering.

Her head snaps back—facing forward. She lifts her knees higher as they run.

They tumble suddenly out into darkness, the whispers and music cutting off into empty ringing.

She's shaking, hunched over, her hands resting on her knees.

"Kyouko..."

She raises her head, gazing straight into piercing golden eyes.

Her chest constricts. She slams her fist into the alley's wall, ignoring the pain that shoots up her arm.

"Damnit Sayaka. You freaking idiot..."

\\

The streets are just as lively, maybe more so than when they had arrived. She squints at the waning sunlight, letting her eyes adjust from the pale lighting of the previous attraction.

Madoka has her arm tucked close to her side—she glances over, and they share a small smile.

"That was pretty fun, wasn't it, Homura-chan?"

She hums, tilting her face slightly to soak in the remaining light. "Well, compared to a Witch's barrier... it was rather uneventful."

Madoka squeezes her arm. "That's the whole point, Homura-chan! Things like..." her voice drops lightly, "...ghosts... don't have to be scary!" She gives a teasing grin. "Though, you did look kind of surprised when we passed those mirrors."

Homura coughs. "T-That was..." Her voice trails off, not wanting to reveal her thoughts.

Madoka tugs on her arm, letting the subject drop. "Where do you want to go next, Homura-chan?"

She resists the urge to shake her head, though her ears flicks restlessly. "Anywhere is fine, Madoka."

They find a spot off to the side, and after a quick check of the pamphlet, Madoka leads them to the next attraction.

They line up, relaxing as they wait their turn—30 minutes beyond this point.

"I think everyone's at the parade," Madoka comments, moving around to try and find the beginning of the line.

Homura hums absently, watching as a few birds peck at crumbs on the ground. She's startled when she's bumped on her leg. She raises her head, fighting her blush when she sees Madoka's narrowed eyes.

Madoka keeps a hand on her arm. "Are you having fun, Homura-chan?"

A family walks past, and her eyes follow the panicked flutter of wings disappearing to safety. "Hmm...?"

"Homura-chan."

"—Ah." She forces her eyes away. "Uhm, s-sorry, what—what did you ask me, Madoka...?"

Her cap is tapped, and the brim drops, covering half her eyesight. She pushes it back up, revealing Madoka's smiling face.

"Even if we're in a theme park, Homura-chan, birds are still off limits." Her fingers gently readjust the slightly crooked red frames. She smiles, locking her gaze with Homura. "We—"

There's a loud cough behind them, and they both turn to someone nodding at something in front.

Madoka blushes, immediately grabbing Homura to move forward. She bows her head in apology, and once they catch up to the rest of the line, they stand in silence, both keeping their eyes away from each other.

Embarrassment slowly fades, until boredom settles in. A glance to the side, before Madoka sneaks her hand around Homura's. Their fingers link together, and Madoka gives Homura another smile.

"I asked if you were having fun, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks. "Ah..." Her eyebrows furrow as she mulls over Madoka's words. Madoka squeezes her hand; her lavender eyes flicker over to Madoka's apprehensive face.

She squeezes back, lips twitching to a small smile.

"Yes... because Madoka is here."

"E-Eh...?"

She sees the line move, and gently pushes Madoka forward. A few steps, until they're once again waiting.

Homura sighs softly, eyes growing distant. "...I came here, I guess... out of spite...?" Her voice is low, soft enough that only Madoka can hear her.

"Homura-chan...?"

"Maybe, if I came here, without them... without her—I could prove to myself that—I don't need them..." She closes her eyes, mouth twitching, "though, that didn't really work out, either."

Madoka feels her stomach twisting. "Homura-chan..."

Homura's eyes open—clear. She glances down, hoping the shade from her cap will be enough to hide her blush. "Thank you for accompanying me..." She gives a shy glance, "if you weren't here..."

Madoka grips her hand tighter. "Of course I'd be here for you, Homura-chan."

Homura squeezes Madoka's hand. She takes a step forward, and they fill in the gap left by the moving line. "Ma—"

She blinks, feeling the buzz of her phone in pocket. She freezes; no one ever contacted her.

Unless—

"Homura-chan?"

Dread creeps in as she shakily pulls out her phone.

A glance to the screen.

She sighs, feeling a heavy weight settle on her shoulders:

Tomoe Mami.

/

She licks her lips, absently pushing her tongue against her canine; sharp, but a comforting pressure that keeps her grounded.

The phone shakes once more, and if she really, really wanted to, she's sure she'd be able to feel the uneven heartbeats that thrum in her chest; feel the light prickles that run down her spine.

Dread has passed—replaced with a calm understanding: happiness can only be short-lived—especially for someone like her.

The vibrations stop as her fingers grip metal and plastic; a brief pause, before it starts once again.

Finally, she answers, placing her phone to her ear.

"Tomoe Ma—"

"—There you are! Where—"

She switches gears. "...What has happened, Sakura Kyouko?" She keeps her voice quiet, words clear, breath minimal.

"...It's—Sayaka. You need—to come back. Bring—Pinky—here. She's—she'll help snap her out of it! Bring—Bring her here!"

She breathes in deeply, catching the not so subtle hints of hysteria in Kyouko's voice.

Maybe, this was her punishment for becoming complacent—for thinking that somehow she could depend on them to not ruin things, this time.

"Where's Tomoe Mami?"

"She's—sitting right by me—what does it matter?"

"How is she faring?"

"Faring? She's sipping on tea and eating crumpets! There's—*Homura*." Kyouko's voice cracks as she whispers her name like a desperate plea.

She closes her eyes. "—don't try anything—we'll be back as soon as possible."

"—You're coming back?"

"Just—wait for us."

"Y-Yeah. Yeah—yeah!" She hears the relief in her voice. "We'll—we'll wait."

"If that's all, Sakura Kyouko?"

The speakers crackle, "...I was right there," Kyouko whispers, "—I could've—"

Her eyes open as she glances to the evening sky. "I'm sure you did the best you could."

"You—can save her, can't you, Homura? Those notes—of yours, you have—a plan, or something in there, don't you?"

She pauses. "...Kyouko."

"Y-Yeah—I'll—" she clears her throat, "I'll see you when you get here."

"...Take care."

"Y-Yeah—er, I'll see you then, Homura. You—and Pinky both."

She hears her shaky breath, before the line cuts off. The phone is lowered, and she finally remembers to breathe.

"...Homura-chan?"

Her head snaps up as she whirls around. "Madoka...? Why are you...? I was—going to be right back."

Madoka nods, taking small steps as she approaches. Homura had wandered off to a small corner by the gift shop—out of the way from the crowd, and it had taken her a few minutes of searching to find her.

"Yes—but..." she glances down, wringing her hands, "you were taking a while; I was worried." She lifts her eyes, her pink rose meeting lavender. "Is everything alright...? Who..." she licks her lips, trying to ignore the pounding in her chest, "was it?"

She stops in front of Homura, reaching for her hand—the one still holding onto her phone.

Dread continues to grows in the pit of her stomach when Homura remains quiet. "...Homura-chan?"

Homura turns her head away. "I'm sorry."

Her stomach churns as the unease spreads. "For—" she swallows, mouth growing dry, "for what, Homura-chan?"

Homura breathes slowly, hands gentle as they move for Madoka's. She turns them over, letting her fingers brush against Madoka's tanned skin; watching as their matching bracelets sway back and forth.

"Homura-chan?"

Their eyes meet, and Madoka steps back, gasping lightly at the weariness on Homura's face.

"What's—wrong, Homura-chan?"

Homura's hands shake as she screws her eyes shut. "I'm—so, so sorry."

"Stop—apologizing, Homura-chan. You're scaring me—" She flinches when something wet hits her hand. With wide eyes, she takes in Homura's hunched figure—the cap covers her face, and angrily, she pushes it up, freezing at the tears that flow down Homura's cheeks.

"Homura-chan...?" She moves to step forward, but Homura presses her fingers down, stopping her.

"I'm sorry," Homura whispers. "I—" she takes in a gulp of air, ignoring the pain tightening around her chest. "...Miki Sayaka is dead."

Madoka stills. Her mouth twists, body growing numb. "That's—not a very good thing to j-joke about, Homura-chan." She tries to pull her hands away, but Homura refuses to let go.

"Madoka... I'm sorry."

She shakes her head, "n-no, you're—Sayaka—Sayaka-chan is—" she slides one foot back, still shaking her head, "you're—wr—"

Strong hands grab her wrists, tugging her forward. She lands heavily against Homura, right before arms encircle her.

"Please—Madoka. I—wouldn't lie to you—not now."

"No. No! No, Homura-chan—no—Sayaka-chan—can't—"

Her attempts at escape are empty, and somewhere, deep down, she knows that Homura's telling the truth. Her resolve slowly wavers, until it finally crumples. She buries her face into Homura's shoulder, her sobs muffled against her jacket.

"I'm sorry, Madoka. I'm so sorr**y."**

AN: Ah... yes, 2 down, 4 to go. (does Hitomi count as 1?)

Thanks for reading, for reviewing, and for waiting... 4 months?ish. I'm not sure when the next one will be, but hopefully there won't be another super long gap in between. No guarantees though.

Take care.

Chapter 29: countdown

Before sulphur and smoke and bright lights can fill the air, they leave the theme park, feet dragging as they trudge along.

The crowd at the station is bare; hours still remain until closing.

When the train arrives, half filled compartments enable them to sit side by side, with little distance in between.

They sink into silence, Madoka with eyes red and puffy, no longer shining like they had been, just hours ago.

Homura already knows what she's thinking—knows the kind of conclusion she will end with; knows how much this will sway her decision.

Her chest hurts: a deep gnawing pain, one that has been with her for a very long time.

She squeezes her eyes shut, fingers pressed against the surface of their seats.

With a start, her eyes open as Madoka falls against her, leaning heavily on her shoulder. The smell of sweets still linger; the ends of pink hair tickles her exposed skin. Her lips part, but mouth dry, the words catch in her throat.

She looks away.

A touch on her hand, and she flinches in surprise. She sucks in a deep breath, and turns to Madoka, only to find her staring out the window, expression still distant; still dull.

Madoka still does not speak, no words said as her fingers seek Homura's in reassurance; Homura can only offer an encouraging squeeze of her hand.

She knows it's not enough.

Guiltily, she lowers her head, letting the slow thrum of wheels gliding along the tracks fill the silence.

She shuts her eyes close.

Her chest hurts, so, so much.

/

The night sky is clear, and if she wanted to, magic could let her see past the light pollution, far enough to maybe see the stars. Disgust twists her face ever so slightly, before it fades, and she's left with that familiar feeling, reminiscent of the day her dad had—

She pushes away from the balcony, turning her head to peer through the clear glass: Mami is still puttering about, moving from the kitchen to the living room, carrying dishes filled with sweets, and other foods as they bide their time.

She sighs, and cracks her shoulders, popping the joints, trying to ease the tension from her body.

It works, if only temporarily.

She steps towards the balcony door, one hand reaching for the metal handle; another deep breath, and then she slides the door open.

The warmth hits her first, a contrast against her chilled skin, followed by the aroma of sugar and fruits that hit her nose.

Her mouth waters involuntarily, and she steps inside, pulling the door closed behind her.

A glance to the table overflowing with baked goods, and another glance around the now empty room. Silence, occasionally cut with the faint click of a clock.

She snatches a pastry as she passes the table, and takes a big bite as she walks to the kitchen. The clock grows in volume the closer she gets.

The kitchen, and Mami is there, a view of her profile as she stands, hunched over a large metal bowl placed on the counter. There's a wooden spoon in her hand, but as Kyouko approaches, she realizes Mami's just staring, seemingly frozen in place.

"Mami."

Mami jumps, and metal rings as the spoon taps against the side of the bowl.

They both pause, letting the sound fade, only for it to be replaced by the slow tick: the pendulum that stretches across the ceiling. Kyouko eyes it warily, not for the first time wondering why Mami seemed fond of it.

A few more swings of the metal projection, before Kyouko turns to Mami, nodding to the bowl by her hands. "Need any help, uh, finishing that...?"

She cringes, hearing the awkwardness in her voice, but tries her best to ignore it.

Mami shakes her head, blinking slowly. "Oh. No—that's..." Her eyes dart to the side, "we're... out of sugar." She gestures almost absently, "I—must've used it all on the previous cake..."

The rest of the pastry is stuffed into Kyouko's mouth, and her words are muffled as she speaks, "wanmetogobwuysome?"

Mami looks her way, gaze unfocused, and when the usual reprimand is not spoken, Kyouko knows that Mami's not faring as well as she pretended to be.

Her mouthful is finished, and with two wide strides, Kyouko stands by Mami's side. One quick swoop, and her fingers wrap around Mami's left wrist.

Mami blinks, but her hand is held in front of her face; her eyes unwillingly focus on the silver band wrapped around her finger.

"Show me your gem."

Golden eyes widen, but the pressure on her wrist increases; she deflates.

The room shines in gold, dulling when Mami's soul gem reforms in her palm. Silently, Kyouko pulls out a grief seed from her pocket and places it next to the darkened gem.

The shadows seem to fade from underneath Mami's eyes, her skin filling with colour, no longer as ashen gray.

Kyouko pockets the used grief seed as she lets go.

A flash as her ring returns, before Mami casts her eyes to the floor, feeling the shame and regret building. "Kyou—"

"It was my fault."

Mami's head snaps up, "what? You can't—"

Kyouko's hands tighten into fists as she closes her eyes. "Sea—" she shakes her head, "Hitomi—" the name is whispered, almost drowned out by the sound of the pendulum, "I—saw her, this afternoon."

Mami takes a moment to process her words, realizing Kyouko had to have met her sometime in the afternoon. She licks her dry lips, "did you—say something to her?"

Kyouko covers her face with her hand, letting out a small bark of sharp laughter. "I told her that she had it easy; that she shouldn't go biting off more than she could chew."

Mami reaches for her, but Kyouko pulls her hand away, revealing darkened eyes that are still dry.

"I was probably the last person that saw her," Kyouko murmurs. She turns her head, her crimson eyes piercing straight to Mami's. "Someone will probably point me out when they start asking questions."

Mami nods slowly, letting her hand drop. "You'll... probably be called in for questioning."

"I'll have to lay low for a while—maybe only go out when it's dark." A humourless smirk stretches across her lips, "not something I'm not used to though."

Mami eyes her for a moment, not for the first time wondering of Kyouko and the life she had lived when she had left almost a year ago; another stab of guilt, but Kyouko's next words makes her freeze.

"You think... Kitty Cat can fix this?" Kyouko's voice is small, lacking her usual tone of bravado.

Mami swallows, pushing back that awful taste in her mouth that no amount of tea or sweets could wash away. "I'm..." she clears her throat, "I'm not sure. Akemi-chan is... certainly knowledgeable, but I've... never heard of any other ending for a Witch, rather than..."

Kyouko relaxes, eyes closing, face tilting up as her arms are clasped behind her head. "Yeah," she breathes out. "If things were that easy," she flashes her teeth, eyes opening, "then, we wouldn't even need wishes in the first place."

She turns to Mami.

"You want me to go out and buy that sugar?" She takes in Mami's appearance. "...Want to go with me to buy sugar?"

Above, and the pendulum continues to swing: up, and then down.

Mami hesitates, but when Kyouko raises an eyebrow, she reaches behind to untie her apron. "Yes, that does sound... like a good idea."

Kyouko nods, already turning her attention to one of the many plates on the counter. "Yeah. Some sugar... and whatever else you need."

They share a look, and Mami nods this time in understanding. Decided, Kyouko gives her a small smirk, before she reaches for a slice of cake.

\\

The air hangs heavy; suffocating. Homura breathes in shallowly, afraid that any words now will make whatever it is, shatter to pieces.

Card in hand, Madoka unlocks the door to their hotel room. She swings it open, allowing Homura to enter first. A timid glance, before she steps through. She bypasses the light switch unconsciously; her eyes have already adjusted to the darkness as she walks straight to the refrigerator.

There's several milk boxes in her hands when light floods in, illuminating the room. She turns, hearing the closing of the door, and watches as Madoka continues inside. She walks past the bed, and heads straight into the bathroom..

Homura's ears flatten as she glances down.

She's through her third milk box when the door opens, and Madoka steps back out. Sharp lavender watches every movement: soft footsteps as Madoka walks across the room, stopping once she reaches the front of their suitcase. It takes a moment until Homura realizes she's packing.

She takes one last sip, and then pulls the straw away. Nervous, she licks her lips, and is on the verge of licking her hand, when she forces it back down. Her ears twitch, but she shakes her head, resisting the temptation to reach for another box.

"We—" she swallows hard, "we can't leave yet."

Clothes in hand, Madoka pauses and turns to her direction. "What...do you mean, Homura-chan?"

Her voice wobbles, and Homura knows Madoka is seconds away from breaking down.

"...The room is under your mother's name; she—if we leave now—there's no reason for us to leave now..." her voice trails off; she knows it's a weak excuse, but she doesn't know how else to deal with Junko without raising suspicion.

Instead of replying, Madoka continues packing. She walks around the room, gathering, and then folding whatever clothes that had been left out. When everything is secured, the suitcase is closed, and zipped shut.

Homura rocks back on her heels, caught between wanting to dash to Madoka's side and comfort her, or going to the corner to sulk and drown her sorrows with milk.

Finally, Madoka turns to face her. "I'll call Mama and have her check us out early..."

There's a small rumble in Homura's throat, but it stops when she starts speaking. "What will you tell her...?"

Her tail has unconsciously been summoned, and Madoka watches it flicker around anxiously for a few seconds, before she focuses her eyes back to Homura's face.

She blinks, but the burning feeling is back, and seconds later, the tears once again well in her eyes. She shakes her head, eyes closing as she presses her hands to them, struggling to keep the tears at bay.

"Madoka?"

Madoka jumps, eyes opening when she hears Homura's voice besides her. There's a box of milk held out, but it's the sight of Homura that makes her eyes tear tenfold.

She throws herself against her, burying her face into her thin shoulder. The tears flow even as she tries to calm the sobs that escape.

An empty moment, until arms finally encircle her, and gentle words are whispered in her ear.

She hugs Homura tighter, knowing it is only a matter of time before that weak heart beating in that small body of hers gives up.

It only makes her cry harder.

/

The night is cool, and she knows it's not her imagination that the shadows seem to flicker and dance; she can feel traces of magic in the air; ones that growl with hunger, searching for victims to be kissed.

She reaches out with her magic, pinpointing the closest two: they are far enough that they pose no threat. For now.

When she turns back, slits of crimson are watching, and she pauses when she realizes those eyes are waiting for her response.

She is reminded that she is not a leader—that her air of importance is merely an act, and yet—

There are those who would follow her.

She shakes her head, and Kyouko visibly relaxes. She steps forward, Kyouko waiting for her so that they can continue walking side by side.

The store is close enough, and in a few minutes they reach the entrance.

Kyouko stops, tilting her head towards the building. "You... alright there, Mami?"

Mami nods, trying to ignore the guilt churning in her stomach. "I was just wondering if there's anything you'd like for me to make...?"

Kyouko blinks, but the mention of food hits a switch, and she doesn't hesitate as she steps forward, impatient as she waits for the door to automatically open. "Well..." she snatches a basket, and with her other hand, grasps the sleeve of Mami's sweater, pulling her along as she heads down the aisle, "if you insist."

Mami lets herself get dragged, listening to Kyouko's mutterings, letting it replace the other whispers in her mind.

/

The soft rumble from Homura comforts her, and with her eyes closed, she could easily fall asleep right here on the floor.

It's tempting, but instead she sniffles, and after she makes sure to memorize Homura's warmth, she opens her eyes, and pulls away.

The rumbling immediately stops, and when Homura looks up, Madoka manages a half smile even through swollen eyes. She dabs at her cheeks with her jacket sleeve, and with another sniffle, she moves to stand.

Before Homura can follow after her, she reaches over, removing Homura's cap and exposing those twitching cat ears. The hat is set aside, haphazardly deposited on top of the suitcase.

She turns back, and scratches Homura's ears affectionately. "I need to wash up..." One last scratch, before she reluctantly pulls her hand away.

Still sitting, Homura watches as Madoka walks to the bathroom.

After she gives a reassuring smile, she once again shuts the door behind her. With a soft soft, she leans against the door, feeling the exhaustion settle deep into her bones.

The silence of the bathroom fills her ears; the blindingly white walls fills her vision. The tiles under her feet are cold, and her cheeks are taut from her dried tears.

She shakes her head, and her hands move to slap her cheeks.

When she re-emerges from the bathroom, Homura is still where she had left her, and she smiles when she sees her once again sipping on milk.

The smile falters, and she takes a moment to steel herself, before she walks forward.

A deep breath, "I'm gonna call Mama now."

That unfocused gaze zeroes in on her, and though Homura's face is blank, the ears and restless tail gives her thoughts away.

Madoka slips her hand into her pocket, pulling out her phone. The screen is unlocked, and the sight of a familiar icon makes her throat close. She claps her hand over her mouth, sinking to the floor as she wills herself not to cry.

"Madoka?" Homura's voice by her ear.

"I'm—okay," she croaks out, leaving her phone nearby as she tries to push Sayaka's face from her mind. Eyes squeezed shut, she swallows quickly. "H-Homura—chan...?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"Could you... get me some milk, please...?"

Something soft brushes against her cheek, right before the warmth from Homura disappears. Quick footsteps, rustling, and then the refrigerator slams shut, muffling the sounds as the racks inside rattle.

A deep breath, and Madoka opens her eyes just as Homura returns with an armful of milk boxes cradled to her chest. She is quickly offered one: strawberry.

"Thank you," she murmurs, accepting it. Plastic crinkles as she unwraps the straw, but she's distracted when she chooses to scratch Homura's ears again. "I'm okay. Thank you, Homura-chan."

Unsure, Homura offers her another box. Cracking a small smile, Madoka shakes her head. Once the straw is set in place, she immediately moves to take a sip. The familiar taste fills her mouth as the cool liquid soothes her throat.

She drinks, and drinks until only air comes up, signalling a now empty carton. The same milk box from earlier is offered, but Madoka shakes her head again, and sets the empty one to her side. Calmer now, she picks up her phone.

The unlocked screen, but this time she quickly swipes down, and then right, dismissing the notification.

She thumbs through her contact list, and selects the first on the list.

The speaker echoes with rings, and she grips her jacket as she rehearses her excuse in her head.

"Hello?"

All thought flees from her mind when she hears her mother's voice. "...Mama?" Her voice cracks, and she quickly tries to swallow the escaping sob.

"Madoka? Hey, is everything okay?"

She doesn't trust her voice, and instead releases a small sound as she nods. "Y—" she swallows again, "yes..."

"...Honey, what's wrong?"

She chokes down another sob. "Mama..." She hates how her voice sounds so weak. "Can —I come home?" She swipes at her eyes in frustration, "I—want to come home, Mama."

Her mother is silent, and she hiccups as she waits for her response. "Madoka, is Homura there? Can I talk to her?"

She makes another sound, and passes the phone over. Hands free, Madoka throws herself against Homura, pressing her face against her shoulder.

Swallowing nervously, Homura brings the phone to her ear. "Hello...?"

"Homura."

She gulps unconsciously. "J-Junko-san..."

Junko drops her voice, most likely because she knows Madoka is still nearby. "Is— everything alright? Did something happen?"

Her heart twists; so many things have already happened, but she knows Junko couldn't —shouldn't know about those. She nervously licks her lips, still tasting a bit of strawberry milk on her tongue.

"Homura?"

She snaps back to the present, "y-yes, I'm sorry, I'm here... Madoka..." she glances down to the sobbing girl, "...I think, today's events overwhelmed her..." She holds her breath, knowing that she was horrible at lying to these two in particular.

"...Are you alright?"

She blinks. "Yes, I am fine. It's—Madoka that—"

"Homura."

She stops, unsure of the tone that Junko is using. "Y-Yes, Junko-san...?"

"...I'm sorry."

Her confusion only continues to grow. "For—what, Junko-san...?"

She hears a heavy sigh on the line, followed by rustling. "Homura—are you okay with leaving Tokyo a bit earlier than planned? Madoka told me that she wants to come home."

"That's—fine. I'm..." She presses a hand to her leg, "...I'm finished with what I needed to do here."

Another heavy sigh. "Alright, I'll handle the hotel and everything else." Her voice drops in volume once more. "Homura... I need to tell you something. Is Madoka by you?"

She blinks, "yes...?"

"...actually, no, nevermind. It can wait. Can you put Madoka back on?"

"O-Okay..." She pulls the phone away. With her free hand, she gently shakes Madoka. "Madoka...? Your mom wants to speak to you..."

Madoka sniffles, and accepts the phone with shaking hands. "Mama?"

"Hey," her mother's voice is gentle, and she sniffles again. "Madoka... are you sure that you want to come home?"

"Yes." There's no hesitation in her reply.

"...Alright, I'll book the tickets to the train right now, and you'll be on the first available one in the morning."

Madoka glances to the clock on the night stand. "But—"

"It's not safe for two middle school girls to be at the train station so late at night. Please, Madoka, you can sleep at the hotel, and I promise you I'll book the earliest train I can. Okay, Honey?"

"...O-Okay, Mama."

"I'll mail you the information once I have everything settled. If you change your mind, that's fine too. Let me know, okay?"

"...okay, Mama. Thank you."

"I love you, Madoka."

She sniffles. "I—love you too, Mama."

"See you soon. Try to get some sleep, okay? Tell Homura goodnight for me."

"Okay, Mama. See—you tomorrow. Good night." She waits on the line, and after a few seconds of silence, her mother hangs up. With a shaky breath, she lowers her phone to her lap.

Homura watches her closely, body tense as she struggles, not knowing what to do.

Madoka looks up. "Mama—"

Homura flinches, but Madoka places a hand to her knee, trying to calm her down.

"Mama's booking the train tickets now; we'll leave in the morning." She sighs, and pats Homura's knee. "I'll... go wash up again..."

A small nod is her reply, and moments later, Madoka is once again disappearing into the bathroom.

/

With nothing else planned and appetite lacking, Madoka changes into her pajamas, and promptly crawls into bed. Her body feels numb, and she drags her arms across the mattress, slightly upset because Homura is not next to her.

She lifts her head, enabling her to see the figure hunched over the small table. Surrounding her are guns of various shapes and sizes.

She turns away, because those weapons are reminders of their not so normal life. Thoughts of Sayaka surface, and she presses the heels of her palms to her eyelids, trying to block the memories. The shock has worn off, and all that remains is the deep pool of guilt that continues to widdle away in her stomach.

Chest aching, she pulls her hands away, letting them hit the bed with a small thump as she stretches out her arms.

From the table, Homura turns, her sharp ears easily picking up the sound.

She's not close to being done, but Madoka takes priority, and she stands, sliding the chair back, making the wooden pegs scrape along the carpet.

On cue, Madoka turns as Homura walks towards the bed. The surface dips when Homura sits, and Madoka absently wonders how sensitive the bed could be, especially because Homura weighs nothing.

Homura scoots closer, "Madoka...?"

She shakes herself from her thoughts, and instead holds out one hand for Homura to take. The gleam of metal from her bracelet, right before thin fingers intertwine with hers. She relaxes slightly.

"Homura-chan." She clears her throat, "...what... what do we do?"

Homura settles in next to her, pulling the blankets to cover them both. She turns to face her, "...What do you mean?"

"...about..." Madoka feels her throat close, and Homura squeezes her hand, understanding.

She bites her lip, knowing Madoka wouldn't like what she wants to say. The taste of blood makes her frown when she realizes she has bit too hard. She absently dabs at her lips with her fingers, and then pulls it back to eye the damage as she thinks of an appropriate response.

Her thoughts are interrupted when her hand is grabbed roughly, Madoka now sitting up, looming over her.

"What happened, Homura-chan? Why are you bleeding?" Her grip is borderline painful, voice raised and almost hysterical.

She quickly shakes her head. "N-No, I'm fine, Madoka—"

"Homura-chan—"

"I—accidentally—bit my lip," she winces when Madoka digs her nails in.

Just as sudden, the pressure disappears, and Homura absently starts massaging her wrist.

"...I'm sorry." The horror on Madoka's face drops as her lips twist, and her eyes shut close.

Homura immediately sits up, reaching for her, but her hand is slapped away.

"No! I keep h-hurting you—"

"I'm fine," Homura hisses, ears pressed back as she once again reaches for her.

Wide pink eyes, and another fearful attempt to shake her off, but Homura stops her protests with a hard hug.

"You could never hurt me. I'm—" she closes her eyes, "I'm the one that keeps hurting you." She squeezes Madoka tightly. "Miki Sayaka—" Madoka stiffens, but Homura knows she needs to hear this, "...there's no way to bring her back." She hugs Madoka tighter, stopping her from replying, "you promised," she whispers, "not for me; not for Miki Sayaka. Not for anyone."

She holds Madoka for a moment longer, and just as she's about to pull away, Madoka returns the hug.

"You promised," Homura repeats.

Madoka nods. "I... promised."

"I'll take care of everything," Homura tells her, "so that you'll be able to live your life."

"H-Homura-chan—"

"I promised you, so you have to keep your promise too."

Madoka nods again, clinging to Homura desperately, feeling that ache in her heart grow.

"You promised..."

She chokes back a sob, and squeezes her eyes shut.

\\

The light is fading, enough that she's able to open her eyes; a slight detour, and crossed paths with a moving Witch.

The barrier contracts, melting into different colours, blending, and finally darkening into the night sky. She recalls her transformation, and moves to join Mami who's still sipping on her cup of tea. There's a grief seed by her feet, and when she's close enough, she stoops to pick it up.

Into her pocket as she straightens out. She glances over when there's a soft clink of dish ware; Mami lowering her now empty cup. Their gazes meet, and Kyouko looks away, eyes darting around the area.

"...This really never ends, does it?" It's not a real question, and they both know it.

A flash of light, and Mami returns to her regular clothes. She opens her mouth to comment, but they both freeze when a familiar voice echoes in their minds.

/I see you two are still continuing to fulfill your duties as magical girls/

Kyouko whirls around, her crimson eyes searching the darkness for the source.

White, and they both step back as he jumps down in front of them, eyes shining in the pale moonlight.

Red, and a spear is held out. "Don't come any closer," Kyouko growls, once again transformed.

Kyubey sits back, tail swishing behind him. /It is unfortunate of the circumstances that lead to Sayaka's demise; I was sure she would be able to at least last until the arrival of Walpurgisnacht./

Kyouko swings hard, slicing Kyubey's body in half. She and Mami jump when another appears almost immediately from the shadows, movements slow as it edges towards its former self.

/Humans are always so quick to respond to their emotions./ He shakes his head, and even though Kyouko repositions her spear at him, he leans down to start eating.

Mami frowns, and takes a step closer to Kyouko, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Let's head back, Kyouko. We still need to retrieve our bags."

Kyouko narrows her eyes, face twisting as Kyubey swallows the last piece. "Yeah." She shudders, wanting to get the sight out of her head, "let's get out of here."

/Are you sure it's wise to allow Sayaka to roam? Despite her low potential as a magical girl, she is quite strong as a Witch; I suspect that by tomorrow, she will be close enough to the city to cause harm./

With a snarl, Kyouko's spear once again slices through air. Another dead Kyubey; another immediate return.

Frustrated, Kyouko slams the butt of her spear into the ground. "What the hell do you want? Don't tell me you're here to offer condolences, because we all know you sure as hell don't care what happens to us."

Mami presses her hand down, but Kyouko ignores her, refusing to retreat.

/On the contrary, I do care about what happens. Time is invested in order to raise you girls to become Witches; if you perish before you reach your potential, think of how much energy is wasted./

Kyouko shakes her head, disgust growing at every second. "Yeah, well you sure got what you wanted; S—" she swallows, "Sayaka's a Witch now."

/It is an inevitable part of your contract, though the when varies between different girls. Sayaka was indeed supposed to hatch, but not quite so soon./

Despite her anger, Kyouko finds herself curious. She glances at Mami, almost, but not quite surprised at the daggers she's shooting in Kyubey's direction.

"Yeah? What, did she somehow ruin your plans?" the venom drips from Kyouko's words, but Kyubey does not react.

/Yes, it would have had a bigger impact if she had taken one of you, perhaps Akemi Homura, with her. Such an event would've made Kaname Madoka contract; I'm sure

you're aware of her potential. She could bring the both of them back if she really wanted to./

Kyouko doesn't flinch when a shot rings out. She keeps her eyes on Kyubey as he crumples to the floor.

/I was merely stating a fact. You—/

"We have chatted with you long enough," Mami tells him, voice cold. She discards her used gun, letting it form back into ribbons as it disappears into the folds of her dress. "Kyouko." She nods to her, and then turns on her heel, dissolving her transformation as she moves.

Without breaking her stride, she starts walking down the street.

Kyouko gives Kyubey one last wary glance, before she follows, leaving specks of red in her wake as her clothes return to normal.

They walk with purpose, two sets of mismatched footsteps hitting pavement. They occasionally glance behind them, and Kyouko stifles a growl when she can still see Kyubey trailing after.

Under a flickering street lamp, and the last of Kyouko's patience wears out. She whirls around, jabbing a finger in Kyubey's direction.

"Why are you following us? Get outta here," she snarls.

/There were quite a number of victims that had perished from that Witch. She is much stronger now./

"Yes," Mami replies, glancing at him briefly, "we are quite aware of what happens. If you are here to antagonize us, unfortunately for you, none of us feel like turning into a Witch just yet."

She and Kyouko continue to walk.

Unperturbed, Kyubey trots along, continuing to follow as they make their way to where they had stashed their bags.

/It was unfortunate that that girl, Shizuki Hitomi had also perished./

Kyouko freezes mid-step. She turns around, eyes now narrowed slits. "I should've known you had something to do with it."

Kyubey stops, pausing to scratch his ears with his leg. /I had nothing to do with her situation. She was merely vulnerable to the whispers of a Witch./

Kyouko takes one step forward, but stops when Mami extends an arm out.

Mami frowns, eyeing Kyubey as he stares at them, unblinking. That familiar face reminds her of his lies—and she swallows hard, forcing her emotions down.

"What do you want from us? We have no reasons to talk with you; leave us alone." Her voice wavers, and the glance from Kyouko has her straightening her back. She clears her throat, "leave."

Kyubey tilts his head. /I am merely curious. You girls know that defeating Walpurgisnacht is all but impossible without Kaname Madoka. Now that Sayaka is no longer here—/

It's subtle, but they both flinch.

/—your chances have lowered even further. Humans are strange. Why do you continue to try, even though you know what the outcome will be?/

Kyouko crosses her arms across her chest. "What does it even matter to you? 'It is an inevitable part of your contract'," she repeats, spitting out the words in disgust. "What we do in that time is up to us." She glares at him, but suddenly smirks. "You know, I thought you were being awfully chatty. Don't tell me, are you lonely? Is the little white creature feeling sad now that he has no one to talk to but himself?"

He stares at her blankly. /We do not possess emotions like humans do; loneliness and sadness is not something we can comprehend./

Kyouko shakes her head, holding out her hands in a seemingly helpless gesture. "Sure, whatever you say, Kyubey. Why don't you just think about it, by yourself." She nods to Mami. "Let's go while the little incubator tries to figure out what he's feeling."

Mami blinks, but when Kyouko taps her on the shoulder, she nods. "R-Right." Another glance at Kyubey, before she follows.

Kyubey remains in place, watching as they disappear around the corner. /...Humans sure are strange./

He walks away in the opposite direction.

/

She tosses and turns, unable to sleep even though she's sure it's late. Her eyes open, and she squints as she waits for them to adjust to the soft light permeating in the room. Once done, she turns her head, searching for the clock: close to midnight. She flops over in bed, turning now so that she can see the figure that is still hunched over the table.

She knows that Homura needs to prepare, but...

She sits up, mouth opening, but changes her mind when she remembers how easily Homura frightens. Instead, she pushes the covers back to scoot off the bed. The difference of temperature from the bed to the room makes her shiver lightly; she glances to the thermostat, and after another glance to Homura who is still busy, she decides to at least make the room a bit warmer.

Across the room, and as soon as the settings are changed, the fan turns off with a small rumble.

When Madoka turns around again, she jumps lightly when she sees Homura looking at her.

"Sorry," she fumbles with her pajamas, suddenly feeling guilty.

Homura gently lowers the container in her hands, "no—sorry, was it too cold...? It... lower temperatures are better for gunpowder..." she trails off, looking embarrassed.

"Oh..." Madoka quickly turns the fan back on.

"Ah...you—don't have to..."

She shakes her head, and walks over to join Homura by the table. "It's okay, I can just get a sweater or something. How..." she eyes the various canisters lined up on the table, "how far are you?"

Homura hesitates, but when it's obvious Madoka won't change her mind, she answers her question. She pauses, mentally checking off her list. "...If I continue to work through the night, I'll be... close to half done...?"

Madoka's eyebrows furrow. "So little? But..."

"...There are a lot of preparations that I have neglected."

The reason hangs in the air, enforced by the way Homura deliberately avoids meeting her eyes.

Madoka steps closer, mindful of the containers also placed on the floor. "Can I help? If we had two people, it'd be faster?"

Homura looks doubtful, and Madoka is once again reminded of just how much she can't do.

"Sorry," she mumbles, unable to keep the hurt off her face.

Homura quickly shakes her head. "N-No! I mean—it's—it's not that hard... Simple measurements..." she gives Madoka a small smile, "most of the recipes I found online. 'Anyone with a middle-school level knowledge of chemistry can do it.'"

Madoka blinks in surprise. "...You found them on the internet?"

Homura nods. She pushes her chair back to stand. "I'll—I'll make some room for you." She pauses, "you really don't have to help me... You should sleep."

Madoka smiles weakly, "I... can't really sleep though..."

"R-Right." Homura starts packing canisters—finished bombs, Madoka assumes—into her shield. When she's done, she checks off something on a sheet of paper, before she starts stacking the small barrels to help clear out space.

Not wanting to get in her way, Madoka moves to retrieve a sweater from their suitcase. She pulls out the first one she sees—a black hoodie that Junko had bought for Homura—and puts it on. The fabric is soft, and she keeps her hands hidden in her sleeves, waiting by the bed for Homura to finish cleaning.

Finally, Homura carries over one of the chairs that had been placed by the door back to the table. She gestures to the seat, "you can sit here..."

Madoka nods, making her way over to sit down. "Thank you, Homura-chan." She takes a seat, scooting it closer to the table as she glances to the barrels, "so, where do I start?"

"Uhm..." Homura remains standing, absently tugging on her jacket sleeve. She ducks her head, and her ears flatten against her head. "Can—I—uhm..."

Madoka frowns, "...you said so yourself it's simple to do. I promise I'll be able to follow along."

Homura's tail absently flickers about, "no... that's not..."

"Homura-chan? Please, I know... I know I'm not that great of a student... but... I want to help you..." To her frustration, tears are in her eyes, "I said I'd help you. Please?"

Homura ducks her head. "N-No—it's—"

Madoka deflates, feeling the sting of rejection.

"I—can I have some milk first?" Homura blurts out.

They fall into silence, and the thrum of the fan fills the room, occasionally broken by the sound of Homura's tail as it flickers back and forth, hitting her leg as it moves.

Madoka blinks. She wipes her eyes dry, and looks at Homura who now has her head bowed. "Milk..."

There's a peek of lavender from dark bangs, and Madoka feels something inside her bubble up at the sight: she covers her mouth, shoulders shaking.

Homura lifts her head, and freezes when she realizes Madoka is laughing.

"H-Homu—" she can't finish the word, and clutches her stomach. "Milk—" she gasps out.

Homura's ears twitch. On one hand, she's glad that Madoka is able to laugh; on the other... she pouts, because Madoka still has not agreed.

"Madoka...?"

"I'm sorry—" Madoka apologizes in between fits of laughter. "Yes—t-that's—" another glance at Homura has her doubling over, "f-fine."

Homura quickly rushes over to the refrigerator, leaving Madoka at the table to recover. Eventually, the giggles stop, and she sighs as she swipes at her eyes. She covers her face with her hands; the moment has passed, and she knows it's the wrong time to be laughing.

She jumps, hitting her knee on the underside of the table when something cold touches her cheek. "Ow."

"I'm sorry, are you okay, Madoka?"

Madoka winces, rubbing her knee as she looks at Homura and the box of milk in her hand. Her face softens. "Homura-chan..."

Homura bows her head. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

Madoka extends her arms, wrapping them around Homura to pull her close. "Homura-chan..."

Homura stiffens, "y-yes, Madoka...?"

She hugs her tighter, unable to find the right words. She swallows hard, "after you drink your milk... you'll teach me how to do whatever you're doing...?"

Homura nods. "Y-Yes..."

"Okay." Madoka breathes in deeply, and after another moment, she lets Homura go.

Homura timidly holds out a box of milk.

She smiles, this time accepting it. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

Another shy glance by Homura, followed by a light bob of her head. She turns to her milk, ears perking, but blinks when she feels a touch on her ears.

"Nothing," Madoka murmurs, scratching her ears, "drink your milk, Homura-chan."

Homura nods slowly. "O...kay."

/

Late night television, and she flips through the channels, cycling past various infomercials trying to sell her products she cares little about. She repeats the process, until she finally finds something interesting: an old samurai movie with washed out colours and cheesy dialogue.

Settled with something to watch, she grabs one of the plates from the table, and squishes the cushions down with her body, making herself more comfortable.

She stuffs pastry after pastry into her mouth, laughing at the jokes, and accidentally dropping crumbs around her as she eats.

"Kyouko."

She doesn't look away from the screen. "Yeah?"

A long, drawn out sigh, before Mami stands, abandoning the table and her unfinished homework.

Watching the movie, Kyouko shouts in protest when the plate from her hand is lifted.

"Hey! I was eating that!"

"Yes, I know," Mami says dryly. She deposits the plate over to the table, and then starts dusting the crumbs, deliberately pushing Kyouko off the couch to reach those that had sneaked into the cushions.

Kyouko grumbles, and to Mami's exasperation, she shakes the crumbs off her clothes, causing them to tumble to the floor.

"Kyouko."

Kyouko blinks, and when Mami points to the mess, a sheepish grin stretches across her face. "Whoops. Sorry."

Mami shakes her head, "...it's fine." Holding the gathered crumbs in her hand, Mami walks to the kitchen.

Kyouko scratches her head. The movie still plays in the background, and she turns when she hears the clash of metal—her eyes widen, and suddenly, she doesn't feel like watching any more.

The screen is fading to black when Mami emerges from the kitchen, a small brush and dustpan in her hand.

She glances at the screen, noting the silence; the pendulum has already been shut off. "You're not watching?"

Kyouko shrugs. "Nah. Wasn't very good."

Mami eyes her for a moment, but when Kyouko offers no other explanation, she kneels to sweep the floor.

Kyouko awkwardly stands to the side, hands tucked into her pockets as she watches.

When Mami lifts her head, their eyes meet: gold to crimson. The dustpan is lowered to her side. "Did... you want to talk about it?"

Kyouko sighs, one toe scuffing the carpet almost absently. "...Nah, not really." She squints at Mami, "...you?"

Mami folds her hands together in her lap, eyebrows furrowed in thought. With a shake of her head, "...no, not really..." She turns, facing the balcony to stare at the city lights.

Silence, suddenly broken when Kyouko growls as she angrily runs her hand through her hair. "Mami."

"Yes, Kyouko?"

Kyouko reaches for another snack. She opens her mouth, but doesn't take a bite, "wanna come with me to buy some sugar?"

Mami blinks. "We still have some—"

Kyouko raises her eyebrows, taking a pointed bite of the cookie.

Mami sits up in understanding. "It's... rather late, isn't it?"

Another look.

She nods. "Maybe... buying some sugar will help."

It's a school night, but they both know that she won't be able to sleep yet.

Satisfied with her answer, Kyouko stuffs the rest of the cookie in her mouth.

Mami narrows her eyes at the crumbs, but she's startled as a hand clamps down on her shoulder. Kyouko points her thumb at the door.

"I'll clean it when we get back; let's go."

"...Alright." Mami moves to stand. "Let me use the restroom first..."

Kyouko waves her away. "Yeah, yeah, hurry up. It's getting late."

Mami gives her a weak smile, before she continues down the hall.

Kyouko quickly grabs a few more cookies, stuffing them all into her mouth. She ignores how her eyes burn, angrily wiping them, before reaching for something else to eat.

\\

Without meaning to, her eyes flutter close as her head droops down; she snaps awake, shaking her head when she realizes she had almost fallen asleep. A quick glance to Homura, and she breathes a soft sigh of relief. She frowns, and squeezes her eyes shut, before quickly opening them again, trying to will the sleepiness away.

Her determination lasts for a few more minutes, until her eyes once again close. This time, she isn't able to rouse herself awake fast enough, and the small container slips from her fingers.

Her eyes open in panic, but a pale, outstretched hand has already caught her mistake. She looks up, and finds Homura staring at her.

The shame makes her face warm. "I'm sorry..." she mumbles. "It won't happen again."

Quietly, Homura lowers the canister to the table. Madoka looks down, but when a hand gently touches hers, she raises her head.

"You should sleep if you're tired." The gentle expression Homura offers her does little to ease her guilt.

"No," she says stubbornly, "I'm fine. I just need to wash my face. I'll be right back." Before Homura can argue, she's out of her seat and heading to the bathroom.

Homura blinks as the door closes. Alone, and she finally lets her weariness from the day show; shoulders slouched, she shakes her head, ears flicking as she tries to force the exhaustion to disappear. She blinks again, and her head automatically turns to the refrigerator nearby.

When Madoka steps out, the cold blast of air on her freshly washed face has her shivering. It serves its purpose, and more awake, she searches for Homura, finding her now leaning against the counter by the refrigerator—once again sipping on a milk box.

Lavender cuts to her direction, and Madoka smiles. "Break time?"

Homura nods as she continues to drink. The tell-tale sound, and the empty box is pulled away.

"...Maybe I'll have one too," Madoka murmurs as she glances briefly to the table.

Homura tilts her head, not replying because she's already opening another milk box. When Madoka approaches her, she holds it out.

Madoka smiles as she takes it. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

Homura nods, and moves over to the refrigerator for another box. She pulls the door open, and stops halfway when she feels a hand on her shoulder.

She turns, blinking in confusion, but Madoka leans closer to push the door open wider. Homura tries to stop her, but a pointed look has her relenting.

Her ears flatten as Madoka looks over the contents: the inside is almost empty.

Her eyebrows furrow, and she gives Homura an incredulous look. "Homura-chan!"

Homura's eyes dart to the side as she tries to scrunch her shoulders in to make herself seem smaller. Her tail hits the counter as she struggles to think of an excuse.

She comes up short, and instead bows her head. "It... uhm..."

Madoka looks at the milk box in her hand, and then quickly turns to the trash can by the door: it's overflowing with empty boxes.

"How many did you drink?!"

Homura fidgets with the end of her jacket. "N-Not that much..."

"Homura-chan..."

"Uhm... you—you had some too, remember...?"

"Homura-chan."

Homura doesn't respond. She licks her lips, and Madoka knows if she had the chance, she'd finish the rest tonight.

She sighs, and shuts the refrigerator. When she sees Homura glancing at her, and then to the refrigerator, she grudgingly reaches once more for the handle.

Homura's ears perk immediately, earning her another sigh. The door is closed, and when Madoka turns back with another milk box in her hand, her lips twitch when Homura holds her hands out timidly, obviously waiting in anticipation.

"Homura-chan?"

Nervous eyes glance her way. "...yes, Madoka...?"

The guilt is still there, still toiling away in the pit of stomach; the anguish is still there, still threatening to engulf her body. She still hurts, and it still feels like she can't breathe because there's just so much wrong with the world—and she can't do anything to help.

And yet—

She lowers the milk box, gently placing them into Homura's cupped hands. "Homura-chan?"

Homura tears her gaze away from the milk. "Y-Yes, Madoka...?"

Hands over Homura's, Madoka takes one step forward.

Homura blinks, but she finds herself suddenly pressed against the counter, Madoka leaning in close. She gulps nervously, eyes darting from the milk, to Madoka's face.

"M-Madoka...?"

"Homura-chan?"

Homura turns her head, sucking in a shallow breath as she tries to calm her heartbeat.

Madoka pulls back, and gathers both milk boxes to place them on the counter. Hands now free, she gently places a hand over where Homura's heart is. "I won't—if you don't want me to," she murmurs softly. "You're always so nervous with me—I don't—want to hurt you, Homura-chan. I—" she reaches forward, holding Homura in her arms. She gently strokes her back. "...I don't want you to die, too, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks at Madoka's words.

"I don't want you to die," Madoka whispers, "but I know—I know you're—" she chokes, but shakes her head when Homura tries to pull away.

"Madoka—"

"Please," she croaks out, "let me finish."

Homura draws back, feeling the tears build in her eyes.

"I—" Madoka swallows hard, "I didn't get t-to tell-S-Sayaka-chan... I didn't—I didn't get to apologize to her—" she shuts her eyes, "I-I'll never get the chance to tell her—that I'm sorry..." She sobs, hugging Homura tighter as she thinks to that unread message on her phone. She sniffles, and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. She takes in a wobbly breath, "Sayaka-chan's gone."

"Madoka—"

"Sayaka-chan's no longer here," she repeats, voice firmer this time. "My best friend—is gone—and she—" her lips quiver, but she presses on, "she died, thinking that—I was still mad at her."

She pulls away, giving Homura a clear view of her tear-stained face.

She stares straight into Homura's eyes, gripping her tightly, preventing her from moving away. "Homura-chan."

Homura whines, and Madoka gently leans forward, placing her forehead against Homura's.

"Please—don't look at me like that."

Homura cuts her voice off, trying to swallow down that rumble from her throat. She's only half successful, and Madoka smiles at the strange sound Homura makes.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura gives her a timid look.

Madoka closes her eyes, feeling the emotions build up from inside. "I..." she breathes in deeply, and opens her eyes, smiling lightly at how Homura looks—like someone she had known a long time ago. "I like you, Homura-chan."

Homura stares at her with wide eyes. "I—" she mumbles something inaudibly.

Madoka wraps her arms around Homura, pressing their bodies closer. "I really, really like you, Homura-chan." She blinks, letting the tears fall, "I like you so much—and the thought of you—dying—" she whispers, "hurts so much. I don't want you to die... Don't leave me, Homura-chan."

Homura hugs Madoka, closing her eyes shut as the tears trail down her cheeks. She chokes on her words, and takes in a breath, hiccuping as another sob escapes.

"I-I'm sorry," Homura tells her, knowing exactly how Madoka feels. "I'm s-sorry," she repeats, hugging Madoka tightly. "I—can't—" her voice cracks, and she buries her face into Madoka's neck.

Madoka smiles sadly, tears flowing freely; she knows. She holds Homura for a moment longer, before she gently pulls away.

Homura's glasses are crooked, eyes red rimmed. She probably looks just as bad.

"Homura-chan?" She gently brushes the tears from Homura's eyes. "Want to go wash up?"

Homura makes a small sound, and nods.

Madoka slips her arm around Homura's waist. They stand, and lean against each other as they head to the bathroom.

/

"...Kyouko?"

"Yeah?"

"...Thanks for keeping me company."

Kyouko turns over, pulling the covers around her. "Yeah," she grunts out, eyes closed as she pretends to not be embarrassed.

By her side, and she hears a light laugh from Mami.

"It almost feels like a sleepover," Mami murmurs, "eating junk food and staying up late... telling scary stories."

Kyouko snorts, turning over again, trying to make herself comfortable on this unfamiliar bed. "Next time we have a sleepover, I'll do something about your hair."

"...What's wrong with my hair?"

"Nothing..."

Kyouko smirks to herself, listening as Mami mutters under her breath.

"Don't worry about it." She kicks her legs out, "let's just get some sleep." She emphasizes her words with a loud yawn.

"Right... goodnight, Kyouko."

"'Night." Kyouko waits, but when Mami falls into silence, she too closes her eyes.

\\

Lights blink in the distance; a darkened urban landscape as the city sleeps.

Even with the curtains pulled open, they can't see much from their room: walls of taller buildings, with just a peek of lights to the side. Seclusion, and a certain dreamlike feel; floating, and maybe they're waiting for reality to come crashing down.

She turns over in bed, legs shifting, cloth rustling, facing the figure lying next to her. Lavender that shines, framed in red. Watching her. She reaches out, hand gentle as it brushes Homura's hair back, giving her a clear view of her face.

A sharp inhale, and Madoka waits patiently for her to calm; she'll wait as long as possible, but she also knows that time is running out.

Slowly, Homura relaxes enough that her shallow breaths are a little deeper, a little stronger.

Madoka leans close, resting her head in the crook of Homura's neck. She sighs softly. In a couple hours, they'll be boarding the train to Mitakihara, and this dream will finally be broken.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura moves, the bed bouncing lightly as she makes herself more comfortable. "Yes, Madoka...?"

She closes her eyes. "There's... one week left."

The words fill the room, layering the atmosphere with a sense of finality.

Arms grip her tightly. "Yes."

She opens her eyes. "Homura-chan."

"Yes, Madoka?"

"...Earlier, I really meant what I said."

Homura stiffens, feeling the heat wash over her body. She turns away, "...you—" she shuts her eyes close, "I'm not—" she shakes her head, "you... shouldn't."

Madoka slips her arm around Homura's waist, "I like you, Homura-chan," she repeats.

In her arms, and she can feel Homura shaking.

"Homura-chan."

"You—shouldn't. I'm not—I'm not—who you think I am," Homura whispers, voice thick with emotion. "I'm—I'm a coward—I'm not—"

Madoka tilts her head up, effectively silencing Homura with a kiss to her cheek. "...I'm probably not who you think I am either, Homura-chan." When she hears the rumble from Homura's throat, she reluctantly she sits up. Homura is watching her, eyes wide in fear.

Madoka turns, reaching across the bed to the night stand. A familiar object is pulled from the drawers, before she turns back to Homura, holding out the grief seed.

"Good thing we're going home; we're running low."

Homura closes her eyes in shame, but Madoka knows what she's thinking, and gently takes her hand.

"Your soul gem, Homura-chan."

No response.

Madoka squeezes her hand. "Please?"

A small whine, but the room flashes purple, and the gem materializes in Homura's hand. Darkened spots, soon cleaned until it once more shines brightly.

The spent seed is deposited back to the night stand as Homura's gem returns to its ring form. Once done, they lie back down, and Madoka again fits herself against Homura's side.

"Are you feeling better?"

Homura nods, embarrassed. "Y-Yes..."

"Good." Madoka snuggles closer. "Homura-chan?"

"Y-Yes, Madoka...?"

"Do... do you like me?"

"You're—" Homura cuts herself off, shaking her head. She tries to pull away, "it—doesn't matter."

Angry, Madoka holds on, not willing to let go. "Yes, it does!"

Homura shakes her head, her hands trying to push Madoka off. "N-No—you're—forget about me, I'm not—"

"Stop, please, Homura-chan."

Homura freezes, hearing the hurt in Madoka's voice.

"Look at me?"

Homura raises her eyes, but quickly looks away again.

"...There's one more week left, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers softly.

Homura squeezes her eyes shut. "...I know..."

Madoka turns her head, pressing her face against Homura's shoulder. "If... if this is the last w-week," she swallows, trying to strengthen her voice, "...if this is the last week we have... tell me the truth, please."

Homura covers her eyes with her hand, feeling that ache in her chest grow. "I—" she grits her teeth, "I—" she chokes on her words, "you—you—were all I had. You—you were the only thing good in this world—" the tears flow, and her sobs and her words run together into a jumbled mess.

"I'm sorry," Madoka says, hugging her tightly. "I'm—I'm right here, Homura-chan."

"Don't—" Homura shakes her head, once again trying to pull away. "Y-You have your life, Madoka. You—you need to live—you need to f-forget about us—"

"How can you say that?" Madoka whispers, the tears once again filling her eyes. "I'll never—never ever forget about you, or—" she stops, and takes a deep breath, "...Sayaka-chan—or or Kyouko-chan, or Mami-chan. You're all important—"

"No!" Homura pulls away, sitting up. "Every time, it always ends like this! Y-You never listen...! You're always—!" she hiccups, and angrily wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, smacking her glasses away in the process. She ignores them, eyes angry as she glares at Madoka. "You—always say, that you'd remember, but you never do."

The anger bubbles in Madoka's chest; Homura's accusing words hurt. She sits up, feeling the frustrated tears grow. "Homu—"

"No," Homura hisses, her breathes starting to become painful gasps. She presses a hand to her chest, "you never listen—you always t-try—to—"

Worried, Madoka tries to reach out to her, but she's weakly pushed away. "Stop, Homura-chan," Madoka pleads, watching as Homura's face twists in pain.

"I'm fine," Homura gasps out, trying to will her heart to stop hurting. She tries again to bat Madoka away, but the pain has her collapsing against the other girl as Madoka holds her close.

"Your magic, Homura-chan!"

"I—don't need it," she coughs, wincing as she tries to suck in a breath.

/You don't seem to be faring very well, Akemi Homura./

Chill running down her back, Madoka throws her arms protectively around Homura. She turns, eyes narrowing at the familiar figure seen through the glass windows.

"What do you want," she whispers, voice low and angry.

/I'm sure you two are aware of Sayaka's transformation./

Hearing Sayaka's name in his voice makes her blood boil. She turns away, her hands concentrating on stroking Homura's back, trying to help her recover. "It's okay, Homura-chan. You'll be okay."

/Sayaka is a lot stronger than I imagined; it's rather unfortunate your acquaintance had also been caught./

Madoka freezes as the chill spreads through her body. She slowly lifts her head, turning to stare at Kyubey. "What... what do you mean...? Who—?"

Kyubey tilts his head, eyes glowing in the pale moonlight. /I had assumed that Kyouko had informed you./

Homura coughs, and Madoka barely remembers to continue her administrations.

"Who?" she asks again, the prickle of dread filling the edges of her mind with a sharp, almost blinding pain.

Purple light flashes, and she numbly realizes that Homura's finally healing herself; she keeps her eyes on Kyubey, waiting for his response.

/Just a bit longer, and she might've been able to form a contract./

Madoka grits her teeth. "Who?" she demands. She knows—she knows who he'll say, and she waits, breath held as she repeats the name in her mind.

/I believe her name was... Shizuki Hitomi./

Angry tears fall as his words twist that knife deeper in her heart. "Hitomi-chan..."

She doesn't realize that she's now the one being held, until Homura speaks. "Leave." Her voice is stronger, and Madoka collapses against her.

/Sayaka's power would've been beneficial during your battle with Walpurgisnacht; you are now one magical girl less./

Madoka whimpers at the reminder, and Homura turns angry eyes to Kyubey. Her words fail her as her tails puffs, and an angry hiss escapes her mouth.

Kyubey continues, unperturbed. /There are a few magical girls here in this city. You could recruit them to help. Though, it is rare for magical girls to compromise, which is why I find you girls to be so fascinating./

Kyubey stares at them, silent as he waits for their response. When Homura answers with another hiss, he tilts his head again.

/It would be fairly easy for me to contact any of them at this moment/

Homura tries to contain her anger, swallowing her sounds and turning them into words. "Is that a threat?"

He stares at her, and she knows it's not her imagination that makes his eyes glint. /It is merely a suggestion. Perhaps adding a few to your team would even the odds?/

Homura's tail angrily thumps the mattress. "Don't bother; we're not staying for long."

/You are leaving so soon? Sayaka and Shizuki Hitomi have yet to be declared missing. Unfortunately, their bodies—/

Madoka sobs loudly, covering her ears with her hands. "Stop—stop it—"

Homura hugs her tighter, eyes glaring at Kyubey over Madoka's shoulder. "There's no reason for you to be here; Madoka won't make her wish."

They stare at each other, Homura, ears pressed down, canines exposed at the dispassionate face. Kyubey swishes his tail, and finally bows his head, eyes closing.

/Very well; I've delivered the information I needed to. Kaname Madoka—/

She buries her face against Homura's shoulder.

/—if you ever change your mind, I'll be waiting./

He steps back, fading away and blending into the night.

Silence rings in their minds, only broken by the sobs that escape Madoka's mouth.

Homura presses her head against Madoka's, throat rumbling as she tries her best to comfort her. She doesn't know what else to do, except to hold her.

Madoka sobs loudly, clinging on.

"...I'm sorry," Homura whispers; it's the only thing she can think of.

/

Sunlight peeks across the horizon—the sky is transitioning from murky gray, into pale blue. In another hour, she'll need to wake Madoka.

But for now, she continues to stroke her hair, listening to her relaxed breathing as she sleeps. Each whimper, each pained cry is soothed away as best as she can.

Madoka shifts again, eyebrows furrowing from whatever nightmare that haunts her sleep.

She leans in close, voice low, "it's okay, Madoka, I'm here. I'm here."

When one lone tear trickles down, she gently brushes it away.

Madoka mumbles something, and her voice trails off, still obviously asleep.

Homura ignores her own tears, gritting her teeth to silence her cries. She shuts her eyes close.

Voice a mere whisper, "...of course I like you..." she swallows back her tears, "...maybe —I love you, but I—" she freezes, eyes opening, breath held when she feels Madoka stir.

She does not wake; she merely turns her head, pressing her face against the pillow.

Homura exhales a shaky breath. The tension drains, until the only feeling left is that usual emptiness in her heart. Her glasses are pulled away, and she angrily swipes at her eyes, wiping them dry with her hands.

When she is done, she stares at her glasses, at the red frames that remind her of how weak she is. She folds them closed, and instead summons her soul gem into her hand.

Another brief check to Madoka who still sleeps, before she holds her soul gem close to her eyes. Her vision slowly clears as magic seeps in. She takes a deep breath, and slowly starts rebuilding those barriers in her mind.

No matter what, she'll protect that promise; she'll protect that smile.

She'll—

She swallows, wiping the tears from her eyes.

She'll win, and will finally be able say goodby**e**.

AN: I had wanted to upload this earlier (for Madoka's birthday!) but alas, time, etc etc.

Thanks for reading/reviewing/waiting.

I hate editing; I'm doing okay; hope you're all doing okay too.

Happy belated Birthday Madoka. Take care.

Chapter 30: a thousand needles

Only after a full minute of shaking, does Madoka finally wake. One eye blearily cracks open, and a sliver of rose pink slowly focuses on the figure above her.

"We need to leave soon..." Homura murmurs softly, sitting back when Madoka acknowledges her with a slow blink.

The temptation of sleep remains, but Madoka forces her eyes open when she hears the soft thump of something against the covers. She turns her head, and there are brief glimpses as Homura's tail nervously flickers about.

Sluggishly, Madoka withdraws from the cocoon of blankets to sit up. She doesn't say a word, instead waiting for her body to wake as she continues to watch Homura closely.

Until, "Homura-chan?"

Her tail stops, and as Homura lifts her head, Madoka extends her hand to run her fingers over those soft ears. She closes her eyes, absently petting Homura as she tries to dispel the fog clouding her mind.

Homura purrs in response, and soon after, Madoka feels herself falling back asleep.

Just before her body starts leaning forward, Homura's voice cuts through her haze. "Madoka...?"

"Hm...?"

"It's..."

Reluctantly, she nods in understanding. Her eyes slowly open, vision sharpening as Homura fills her sight. Sudden thoughts, and the last traces of sleep abruptly vanish. She swallows hard, withdrawing her hand, and moves to scoot off the bed.

"I'll—get ready," she murmurs as she swings her legs over the edge.

"I'll make sure we have everything packed..."

Feet barely touching the floor, Madoka suddenly freezes. She turns around quickly, seeking Homura in reassurance: she's moving off the bed, and Madoka reaches for her just as Homura takes a step forward. Her fingers catch air, and her mouth opens, but the words seem to fail her. Homura is moving further away, and for some reason, the view of her back makes Madoka feel so incredibly lonely.

Just as she takes in a gulp of air, Homura turns around. Their eyes meet.

"...Madoka?"

Not trusting her voice, Madoka holds out her arms. An evaluating glance, before Homura obediently walks over. As soon as she's close enough, Madoka pulls her in close.

"Is... are you okay?"

She nods, making a small noise of agreement.

Arms wrap around her, and she hugs Homura tighter.

"...Madoka?"

"Just... a little bit longer."

Instead of replying, Homura gently nuzzles her head.

"Thank you," she whispers, still holding on tightly.

/

Things are different—she can't pinpoint it, but the air feels different.

A corner glance, and after another moment, she finally realizes why. The pink cap is missing, most likely tucked inside their suitcase, and red frames no longer rest across Homura's face; she can still picture them there, and it unnerves her to see them gone.

Without them, Homura carries herself differently: back a little straighter, face a little more expressionless.

Colder, and maybe a little more distant.

Madoka wraps her fingers around that too thin hand, and only when she sees that brief, shy glance, does she feel herself breathing a bit easier.

Homura—

"Homura-chan?"

A few seconds pass, until that light shade of lavender focuses on her. "Yes, Madoka?"

She hesitates, chewing her lip as she struggles to voice her thoughts. "I—" she cuts herself off, forcing herself to not think about— "you—won't leave... before then, will you...?"

Her voice is soft, and she keeps her eyes focused on their shoes as she absently plays with Homura's hand. She pauses, before gently wrapping her fingers around the glint of silver. She traces the patterns with her fingertips—

A sea of red flowers—the shine of metal—Homura, shackled to her grief—

—the heavy swish as the guillotine falls—

I need to save you—

"Madoka?"

The vision shatters as Homura's gentle voice wakes her from her thoughts. A shaky breath, and when she lifts her head, she's back on the platform, and Homura is in front of her, safe and sound. She briefly looks down when she feels Homura thread their fingers together. A flash of white as skin and flesh disappear, but she realizes it's merely another illusion.

Or maybe—a distant memory.

"...There's not much time, until Walpurgisnacht arrives."

Madoka feels her chest constrict at the familiar words. She quickly looks up, "Homura—"

"...I thought about it," Homura admits quietly. "It would be much easier for me to prepare by myself," she breathes in, and then slowly exhales, "but, Kyuubey can't be trusted. He's... persistent."

More than anyone, she understands just how much.

"I may try to arrange something with Mami and Kyouko. Maybe have them watch over you when I can't."

Though the reassurance of Homura not leaving is comforting, a bigger part of her is disappointed when she realizes it's not just because Homura wants to spend their last days together.

Madoka lets that bitterness sink into her stomach, and instead grips Homura's hand, forcing her to look over. She's grasping at straws, trying to find an excuse that will enable Homura to remain by her side.

"Your heart—"

"Is fine."

At Madoka's glare, Homura swallows, but steels her eyes, refusing to back down.

"I'll be careful." Homura squeezes her hand. She gives a small smile, hoping to diffuse the situation, "I promised I'd save you; I'll definitely survive until then."

Madoka falls into silence, eyebrows now furrowed as she sends her glare across the train tracks. She tries to focus on a person, on something, desperately trying to distract herself from Homura's words.

Rapid blinks fail her until her eyesight eventually blurs. She bows her head, pulling her hand away from Homura's to swipe at her tears.

Homura falters when Madoka's shoulders start shaking. A nervous glance around, but she steps forward, pulling Madoka close. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "Don't worry, everything will be over soon, so please, don't cry."

The only response is Madoka burying her face into Homura's shoulder, hands clinging to her tightly.

She returns the hug, and whispers another apology.

\\

So little sleep, and they find themselves dozing in and out as they ride the train home.

After Madoka jolts awake from another nightmare, she shifts uncomfortably as she waits for her heart to calm. Unsettled from what she had seen, she quickly glances over to Homura, needing to confirm with her eyes that she's still there.

She finds it's not enough.

She extends a shaking hand, hesitating as she holds it over Homura's. Breath held, she slowly lowers her arm, until finally, she can feel a solid touch underneath her fingertips.

Something twists in her chest, and she sits back into her seat, slowly deflating as her eyes close.

She keeps her hand on Homura's, shifting her body until their shoulders are pressed close. After a moment, her eyes open, and she watches Homura as she sleeps. Her rare, peaceful expression makes her chest ache. She turns away, lowering her head to rest it on Homura's shoulder. Unfocused eyes wander, unconsciously seeking something to occupy her thoughts. The compartment hums with the sounds of the other passengers, and she focuses on the few that sit nearby.

Another moment passes, until she realizes that they are faceless; she sees them, but at the same time, they aren't there.

It almost feels like she's still locked in her dream, isolated, and no longer a part of their world.

The only thing that feels real—the only thing that's keeping her grounded—is the presence of Homura to her side. Homura is warm, her body heat almost burning feverishly against her.

It's comforting.

Eyes half closed, she eventually turns her attention out the window, where green and grey blur as urban landscape and nature collide. A lull in her thoughts, and it isn't long until her eyes slowly droop close.

She's falling asleep when there's a low rumble that forces her to open her eyes. Recognizing the tone, she frowns as she sits up.

"...Ma... doka..."

She raises her hand, fingers gently catching the tears in Homura's eyes before they have the chance to fall.

Homura whines softly, and fearing that she might summon her ears in her sleep, Madoka quickly presses a hand to her forehead. "Shhh, Homura-chan..."

Madoka's voice immediately calms her, and Homura relaxes once more.

With Homura placated, Madoka cups her cheek briefly, before she reluctantly pulls her hand away. She shifts, once again repositioning her body so that her shoulder and head now lean against Homura's. Eyes still heavy, she closes them, content on listening to Homura as she sleeps.

After another moment, she frowns when she realizes that Homura's breathing sounds different. She leans closer in concentration, trying her best to tune out the background noise.

Shallow, and a little raspy, almost as if Homura is unable to catch a full breath.

Her frown is more prominent when she moves away; how did she not notice this earlier?

No longer feeling tired, her eyes open. She turns to stare out the window, hand now absently twisting the bracelet around her wrist.

Another side glance, before she leans back.

Just how much time did they really have left...?

/

Hands tucked into her jacket pockets, she wanders the city, restless as her irritation grows with every step.

She craves the crunch of cookie and chocolate, but instead, her fingers wrap around a crumpled box; she has already devoured the week supply that Mami had paid for.

With a low growl in her throat, she continues to stalk through the streets, head kept low and face hidden, just in case.

She tenses when she spots a familiar uniform, and quickly changes direction. She turns the corner, and continues walking until she spots an alleyway. She slips through silently, waiting until her eyes readjust, and then she's moving, taking wide steps to avoid suspicious puddles littered on the ground.

On the other side, her eyes involuntarily close as shadows transition into sunlight. She winces, and brings her hand up to block out the glare. One eye tentatively opens, and after a few blinks, the other eye follows suit.

It's a clear spring day, and the colours of the sky makes her throat scratchy and her eyes itch. She reaches behind her, grabbing her hood and throwing it over her head.

It shouldn't be this bright; not today.

\\

She sits up, disorientated as words ring in her head. She quickly swipes at her eyes, and after a bit of focusing, she sees the few passengers around them starting to pack their belongings.

With a start, she realizes that they've arrived in Mitakihara. She turns to Homura, slightly surprised to see her still sleeping.

She files her worry into the back of her mind, and quickly shakes Homura awake. "Homura-chan? Homura-chan! We're home."

The tell-tale whine, right before Homura latches onto Madoka's arm, hugging it tightly as her eyes remain closed.

"Now arriving at Mitakihara station. Arriving at Mitakihara station."

Thinking quickly, Madoka leans close to Homura's ear, "Homura-chan. Time for milk. Your favourite, strawberry milk. If you wake up, I'll let you drink as many boxes as you want."

To her amusement and relief, the tight grip around her arm loosens. Light lavender flutters open, only to stare blankly at Madoka who's trying to maneuver around Homura to grab their bags.

"...Milk?" Homura mumbles, obviously still half asleep.

Unable to resist, Madoka leans over. Her eyes dart around, before she brings one hand up to cover the view of her giving Homura a quick peck on her cheek. She pulls away, "...you're adorable Homura-chan, but please help me make sure we didn't leave anything behind?"

Sleepiness burns away as Homura flushes, and she quickly clamps down on her magic, barely able to keep her ears and tail in check. She nods as she finally lets go of Madoka's arm. She turns, trying to cover her embarrassment, and starts doing what Madoka asked her, checking their seats, and then their area to make sure they haven't forgotten anything.

The chime overhead announces their arrival, and there's a small lurch as the train slowly grinds to a halt.

As soon as the train stops, a hydraulic hiss is released, before the doors open, allowing the passengers to exit.

Homura reaches for their suitcase, but Madoka immediately snatches it out of her hands. Homura blinks as Madoka offers her their smaller bag for her to carry.

They exchange a quick look, until Madoka breaks eye-contact and stands. With a sigh, Homura joins her, and they remain by their seats, waiting for their turn as the small queue slowly exits.

A few minutes later, metal blends into concrete; over the yellow line, and the air outside is cool and crisp. They follow the small crowd onto the platform, Homura sticking close to Madoka as she leads the way. The bottleneck eventually fans out as passengers split to different directions.

Now out in the open, Madoka scours the area, eyes darting and body turning as she searches.

She tiptoes, and finally, she spots her a small distance away: her Mama, standing off to the side, looking as regal as Kaname Junko can be in her casual clothes.

The pressure of the weekend—the pressure of their lifetimes seem to overflow, and Madoka chokes back a sob as she moves to meet her mother.

Her strides gain in length, and she's all but running before she can stop herself. The suitcase rattles behind her, and she's not even sure if Homura is still following. She glances over her shoulder, and the glimpse of lavender and ebony is all that's needed before she barrels forward.

She bumps into a few people in her haste, and halfhearted apologies are murmured as she zeroes in on her target.

Two more steps, and Junko turns to her direction right before impact.

"Oof—"

She clutches her mother, breathing in the familiar smell of make-up and perfume—the smell of home.

"Hey, I'm happy to see you girls too."

Everything seems to spill over as she hears her mother's voice.

"Madoka...?"

Arms wrap around her, and she cries into her mother's chest, happy to be back.

/

It's close to noon when she wakes. She sits up in slight confusion, squinting at the brightness that filters into her room; she is used to the low sunrise greeting her, rather than the bright afternoon sun. She blinks slowly, trying to organize her thoughts, and with a sudden gasp, she turns to face the other side of the bed.

It's empty.

The covers are thrown off, and she quickly moves to exit the room. As she passes the mirror on her vanity, she frowns at her messy appearance. She hurriedly tries to pat her hair down with one hand, as the other reaches to open the bedroom door.

The door swings open, and just as she steps through the doorway, her finger snags on a tangled knot, and she winces when she pulls on it with a little too much force.

She stops in her tracks, finally realizing that she may be overreacting.

"Okay," she breathes out. "Calm down. It's okay." She carefully extracts her hand from her hair. "See, that wasn't too bad..."

She takes in another deep breath, and then slowly releases it.

"She could be in the kitchen—it's late, she was probably hungry."

Ignoring the doubtful voice in her mind, she makes her way through the hallway, and continues straight for the kitchen.

At the entrance, she stares, distracted by the unsightly mess left over from last night: flour is caked along the counters, and a light, white dust can be seen across the tiled floor. Not a single battered covered utensil is soaking in the sink, and all her cooking supplies are misplaced every which way.

Still, "she's not here..."

Dread churns in her stomach, but she forces it down with a hard swallow.

"That's okay. She probably went to buy something to eat. It's lunch time, and," she looks around the kitchen, and then glances behind her, knowing that in the living room, there are plates stacked with various baked goods arranged on the triangular table, "...she went to buy something to eat."

She knows the lie sounds hollow in her own ears; she ignores it, and slowly moves to exit the kitchen.

"I need to wash up, and then..." she looks around once more, "I need to do something about this mess..."

\\

She's not hungry, she's just going through the motions because it's her comfort; eating to forget; eating to eat; eating to fill in that emptiness that constantly claws at her stomach.

And if that isn't hunger, then it has be something else, and that's not something she's ready to face just yet.

She shoves the last bite into her mouth, and then her hands are crumpling the paper wrapper as she heavily clambers to her feet. Without looking, she tosses it into the nearby trash can as she starts walking away.

'What kind of hero would litter? It's our own city that we're protecting; we need to clean up after it, too!'

She freezes, hearing the voice in her head. She turns, and her eyes zero in on the wrapper lying on the ground.

She had missed.

Her mouth twists into a sneer: sad, and more than a little bitter.

She grudgingly steps forward. A crouch, and then she straightens up, staring at the bundle in her hands. She shakes her head, before she stretches out her arm, dropping the wrapper into the bin.

"There, Sayaka. Happy?"

There's no reply, but she isn't expecting one.

She stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets, and starts moving again to skulk through the city.

Unbridled energy seems to flow in her body, and at the closest alleyway, she veers inside to take another detour; it's still bright outside, but with Walpurgisnacht looming ever closer, Witches are plentiful no matter what time.

Her eyes narrow, and in one fluid motion, her hand is pulled from her pocket as she summons her soul gem into her palm.

Something burns in her chest: a flicker of hope when she sees her soul gem shining brightly.

Sayaka is still out there—and maybe, there's a way to bring her back.

She smiles, one fang visible as her lips tug up. "You're stubborn as hell, but luckily for you, so am I."

She starts following the trail, body now humming with anticipation at seeing Sayaka again.

She ignores the warning Mami had given her, and presses forward.

\\

Exhaustion is evident on both of their faces, and as soon as they arrive home, Junko ushers both girls to their room to get some sleep.

"I'll be working from home today, so I'll be in the living room if you need anything."

Madoka nods slowly.

Junko reaches out, and gently brushes Madoka's bangs to the side. "Sleep first; you've had an eventful weekend. Mama'll be here when you wake."

Madoka bites her lip, trying her best to keep her eyes dry. "...Thank you, Mama."

Junko smiles, and kisses Madoka's forehead. She pulls away, and turns to Homura who seems to be swaying on her feet.

"The same goes for you too, Homura."

The sound of her name rouses her from her half sleep, and she raises her head right before Junko leans in close for a hug.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you this weekend; know that I'm very proud of you," she glances to Madoka, "the both of you. I know it wasn't an easy thing to face, but you both handled it as well as I could've hoped."

Homura blinks, hearing Junko's words, but unable to process them.

Junko steps back, and gently pats Homura's arms. "Sleep." She gives Madoka a nod, and then moves over to the door.

"...Thanks, Mama," Madoka murmurs.

Junko's kind smile is the last thing they see before the door clicks shut.

Madoka turns to Homura, mouth opening, but a familiar sound cuts her off.

"Meow."

Hidden in her cat bed, Amy emerges, only to leap into Homura's arms. She easily catches her and holds her against her chest.

"...I'm back," Homura replies. "...I'm fine."

Amy purrs, and bumps her head against Homura's chin. "Meow."

Homura sighs, and her exasperated response is interrupted when Madoka reaches over to scratch Amy's ears.

"Hi Amy," Madoka says quietly.

Homura turns, watching Madoka as she pets Amy. She jumps in surprise when Madoka suddenly focuses on her.

"...Mama's right, Homura-chan," Madoka says as she gives Amy one last scratch. "We should get some sleep."

She's beyond exhausted, and knows that Homura is probably feeling the same way.

Homura blinks when Madoka grabs her arm.

"Sleep—at least for a little while. And then..." Madoka exhales slowly, "and then... we'll deal with everything..."

Homura hesitates, but bows her head lightly when she feels the rumble of Amy purring against her. "...Alright. Let me message Tomoe Mami, to inform her that we're back."

Madoka nods, not letting go, merely waiting as Homura pulls her phone from her pocket.

When Homura continues to stare blankly at the screen, Madoka gently pries the device from her hand. With a few clicks, a brief message is sent, and the phone is closed with a small snap.

She leans over, resting her forehead against Homura's. "Sleep."

Her eyes close and she inhales deeply, finding traces of flowery perfume still lingering in her room.

"...Madoka?"

Her eyes open, and Homura stares at her, face worried. Her body moves automatically, and ever mindful of the small animal still held in Homura's arms, Madoka wraps Homura in a hug.

"Sleep," Madoka repeats again.

"...Okay."

She holds Homura for a moment longer, until she finally pulls away. Her hand trails down to find Homura's, and she manages a smile when thin fingers grasp hers tightly.

Just—a little bit longer.

She moves, dragging Homura with her to get some sleep.

/

Absently, her teeth gnash on her snack, biting and then chewing chunks of meat as her eyes scan her surroundings.

Constant shadows seem to dance along the walls, and she catches glimpses of vaguely familiar shapes with what little light that peeks through the broken ceiling.

The last piece is pulled free from the wooden skewer, and with a sudden flick of her wrist, the stick is embedded right in between a few words tagged on the floor.

Hand outstretched, she summons her soul gem, bathing her surroundings in translucent red. Her fingers encircle the glowing gem, turning everything back into a dull grey.

She sighs, and shakes her head.

Brighter light shines through the gaps between her fingers, and magic flowing, she transforms, spear now gripped tightly in her hands.

"I told you that you'd have to finish what you started," she mutters to herself as she twirls her weapon round. "...Same goes for me; what kind of 'hero' would I be if I just let you sink by yourself?"

There's a small voice in the back of her head, one that begs her to wait, to think it over.

Tries to convince her that she should turn back.

She ignores it, and steps closer to the mark that signals the entrance into the Witch's barrier.

With steel in her hands reflecting the steel in her eyes, she steps forward, disappearing into the opening that welcomes its visitor with open arms.

She smirks widely, letting the magic wash over her.

\\

Now dressed and hair tied in their familiar drills, she enters the living room, feet stopping as she takes a survey of the area. As she spots the plates on the table, her stomach grumbles, and with a small blush, she heads over for a quick snack. She seats herself in her usual spot, and after a brief debate, she reaches for a cookie. Ever mindful of the crumbs, she nibbles on it politely as she absently takes another look around. Her lips dip down when she finally notices the small piles of trash strewn around the table and couch.

Minutes later, she re-emerges from the kitchen, plastic bag in her hands to clean the mess that Kyouko has left.

As she drops box after box into plastic, her irritation morphs into worry when she sees just how much Kyouko has already eaten.

Hunger now forgotten, her stomach flip flops as various scenarios are conjured in her mind. She checks the time; maybe going out would be better than staying home alone.

She ties the ends of the bag handles together, and then leaves it by the entrance; she'll sort them later.

After quickly grabbing her purse and phone, she's slipping on her shoes when she hears a familiar tone, effectively stopping her in her tracks.

Panicking, she digs through her purse, finding her phone at the very bottom. Hands shaking, she unlocks the screen, and proceeds to check her messages. Her eyes scan the sender—a familiar name, and not an undisclosed phone number staring back at her.

"Akemi-chan...?" She rereads the message twice, before she suddenly remembers to breathe.

With a small laugh, she places a hand to her forehead as the tension drains from her body.

She sends out a brief response, and then deposits her phone back into her purse. She shoulders her bag, and squares her shoulders.

She needs to remain calm; needs to remain strong. She has people looking out for her; she has people she can rely on.

The urgency is abated just a little, and she exits her apartment, locking the door behind her.

/

As each step brings her further into the barrier, the indistinguishable buzz in her ears slowly sharpens into a light, persistent tune. The path is lined with red carpet, and the muffled taps of her boots echo and clash with the dull music.

She has yet to run into any familiars, but she knows she's heading the right way: there's only one direction she can go, almost as if someone was leading her through the maze.

Her hand moves, gripping her weapon, and then relaxing as she tries to ease her nerves.

She could go for some pocky right about now.

She continues down the hallway, turning at the corner slowly, body tense as she prepares for what's beyond. She stops when she sees the narrow passage opens up to a large room with high ceilings. The carpet continues straight through, leading to a set of ornate metal doors. Even from this distance, she can see the montage of musical instruments and musical notes etched into the surface.

Here, and the music is suddenly louder; the floor and room seem to shake with a rhythmic pulse.

A deep breath, and with her weapon held tightly, she takes one step forward.

As her heel hits the floor, the large doors spring open, filling the area with earthshaking clangs of cymbals and violins that ring in her ears.

She only has a few seconds to react, before the room sways, and the rolled carpet underneath her pulls her forward; fast and faster, and she wobbles on her feet, trying to remain balanced as she's dragged through the area.

She careens through the doorway, and music crashes against her eardrums from all sides.

A flicker of steel, and with a snarl, she moves, leaping a good distance away to land on one of the few areas not covered with red fabric.

Platforms rise around her; girls appear, ones that dance and twirl with hair the colour of emerald green.

The continuous loud music drowns her thoughts, and she faces the large stage with its main performer dead center.

Her mouth moves, speaking words that only she can hear.

Eyes burning, she readies her weapon, blade now pointing straight ahead.

More words, and almost in understanding, the Mermaid Witch raises her arm in challenge.

A fanged smirk, before she launches herself forward.

\\

She finds she cannot sleep.

Eyes heavy, she blankly stares at the wall, once again listening to shallow breaths as Homura sleeps.

She doesn't mean to, but more tears escape, joining the ones that have already soaked into her pillow. She sniffles, and quickly brushes them away.

When Homura moves, she freezes, but slowly relaxes when the other girl remains asleep.

"Meow." There's a gentle bump against her head, and she blinks as her vision suddenly turns black. A rough touch against her cheek, before she hears the soft rumble as Amy rubs her face against hers.

Another sniffle. She gives Amy a watery smile, and reaches over to run her hands against her ears. Still purring, Amy presses herself close to settle in for a nap, squeezed in right by where Homura's head rests against Madoka's neck.

The exhaustion seems to hits her all at once, and her eyes droop heavily without her knowing.

With the gentle purrs from Amy acting like a lullaby, her eyes close, and it isn't too long until she's fast asleep.

/

She wanders aimlessly, body on autopilot as she navigates through the city that she knows by heart.

A right here, and she lifts her legs higher to avoid a section of uneven pavement; through an alleyway, and she climbs an incline that once upon a time left her slightly breathless, before the road slopes down, putting a bit more pressure on her knees than normal as she descends.

It isn't until she passes by a familiar bench, that she finally stops and notices her surroundings.

As she turns her head, a splash of foreign colour catches her eye: multiple flyers distributed along the walls and light posts.

She approaches the closest one, skimming the words when she's close enough. A wave of nostalgia, followed by the sudden feel of loss—at the end of the month, they will finally start construction.

A future shopping strip, the same like many others that can be found in the city.

She stares at the poster; another piece of her history, lost.

/Mami/

Her eyes widen, and she whirls around, immediately searching for the owner of that voice.

He's right in front of her.

Her hand shakes, and she grips her wrist tightly with her other hand to calm down. "Kyuubey..."

He tilts his head—a familiar gesture that only makes the nostalgia grow.

/Are you alright?/

And suddenly, she's transported to two years ago—to the first time they had met. To her wish; to her survival; to the lonely nights abated with Kyuubey by her side.

To learning about magic; to her first Witch hunt—one where she had barely scraped by. When the barrier had finally faded, Kyuubey had approached her as she sat there on cold cement, shaking, trying her best to catch her breath.

/Are you alright?/

Words he had asked her time and time again.

Her eyes fill with tears. "Leave," she whispers as she squeezes her eyes shut.

She doesn't want to see him; she doesn't want to hear him.

"Leave, please," she whispers once more.

Silence reins for a brief moment, until, /I will leave after I deliver my message/

Her eyes open, and she lifts her head, eyes locking with his piercing stare.

/Kyouko has gone after Sayaka/

Her eyes widen as a chill runs down her back. Doubt floods her face as her eyes nervously dart around. "We agreed to wait until Akemi-chan—until we at least talked to her."

White squishes back and forth, an innocent gesture that matches Kyuubey's equally unassuming face.

/I have been tracking Sayaka's movements since her transformation. There's no doubt about it that Kyouko has gone after her/

She freezes as thoughts surface. Will she be too late? Will Kyouko be strong enough? Will—

Will she be all alone once more?

She breaks out into a cold sweat. She seeks Kyuubey's gaze, "where?"

A second passes, and something snaps. Her foot comes down hard as she takes a step forward.

"WHERE? WHERE IS SHE?"

His face never gives anything away. He merely closes his eyes briefly, before he bows his head and rises to his feet.

/Very well. I will lead you to her, but I must warn you, Sayaka is actually quite formidable in this form/

"*Kyuubey*."

He senses something in her tone, and instead of responding, he starts running, heading to the space that Sayaka and Kyouko occupy.

She follows easily, pushing down those feelings of nostalgia once more as he leads her through the streets, just like old times.

Her fingers curl in tightly, nails digging into palms.

She couldn't save Kyouko back then, but maybe this time—

\\

She tucks her head in, dodging a sharp blade as it whizzes by. A quick exhale, before she crouches low, avoiding the speeding wheels that shoot past, missing her by a mere hair's breadth.

Almost a breath of relief, but her instincts kick in, and she abruptly slices up with her spear, splitting the wheel that has doubled back.

With a low growl, she pumps magic into her legs, using the increased strength to launch her body into the air—and not a moment too soon when she sees two more wheels crash together where she had once stood.

She mutters something under her breath as she lands lightly on carpeted floor.

All that maneuvering, and the stage still somehow looms in front, almost as if it was anchored to the center, spinning and following her no matter where she moved. And in the middle of that is Sayaka, swords held in large metal gauntlets, body swaying back and forth to conduct a musical score that only she can see.

Her mouth opens: "SAYAKA! WAKE UP, YOU IDIOT!"

She dodges left, side stepping the thrown sword.

"ARE YOU THAT WEAK THAT YOU BECAME THE THING WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE FIGHTING?"

She rolls forward, away from the row of blades that are now embedded on the ground.

"YOU TOLD ME YOU WANTED TO BE A HERO—"

She darts right, spear now held tightly in her hands.

"—YOU SAID YOU WANTED TO BECOME STRONGER—"

She leaps high, body twisting as she raises her weapon above her head.

"YOU SAID—" her voice cracks as she remembers—as the reason she became a magical girl rears its ugly head.

She swings down hard, connecting the blade of her spear against the blade of Sayaka's sword. The ring of metal, and her whole body reverberates from the impact. She grits her teeth, reinforcing her arms with magic as she tries to overpower Sayaka.

A burst of strength, and she feels Sayaka give way slightly.

She presses forward, "SAYAKA!"

She focuses on her face, trying to peer past that iron cage, searching for a sign—an inkling of recognition—hesitation—*something*—

—there's nothing there, only the cold glint of steel, and the music that continues to roar in her ears.

\\

It isn't long until she wakes.

The white ceiling above is familiar, and she stares at it blankly, trying to place it. Her thoughts are distracted as she hears a low whine, followed by movements that shake her bed.

She sits up quickly, realizing that the pink comforter is hers, and that they are home.

Home.

"Meow."

She blinks, and turns to see Amy batting Homura with her paw, trying to wake her. Homura continues to toss and turn, and Madoka's mind finally catches up to her body when the low rumbles increase. She quickly pulls the covers back, ignoring Amy's muffled protests as the blanket falls over her, and wraps her arms around Homura, trying to calm her.

"Shhhhh, Homura-chan. You're safe here, Homura-chan. We're home."

Homura thrashes, trying to pull away, but Madoka holds on tight, whispering into her ear and planting kisses atop her head. Amy pokes her head out from under the covers, watching them closely.

Madoka desperately clings to Homura, begging her to wake up before she will somehow injure herself further. Just as the back of her eyes prickle, she hears a small gasp as Homura finally stills.

"Homura-chan?" She pulls back, catching a glimpse of tear filled eyes, before Homura turns away, deliberately blocking her face with her hair.

"N-Nothing, I'm fine," Homura whispers. "Sorry..."

Her flattened ears give her away, and Madoka feels the frustration come back tenfold when she's reminded just how useless she really is. She squeezes her eyes shut, trying to keep herself from crying once more.

"...Madoka?"

She shakes her head, and buries her face into her pillow; she hates how weak she is, and how her default reaction is to cry.

"Madoka...?"

That small, unsure voice makes that hole in her chest grow, and she presses her face further into her pillow. When she feels arms wrap around her, her resolve crumbles, and she turns to grab Homura tightly, burying her face into Homura's chest.

Fingers thread in her hair, and Homura's voice is in her ear. "D-Don't cry, Madoka... I'll protect you..."

"Meow."

She sniffles, and then takes deep breaths to calm down. Once in control, she pulls away. Before she can dry her tears, fabric touches her cheek. She peers over cloth, staring at Homura as she uses her jacket sleeve to wipe Madoka's face dry.

"I'm sorry..." Homura murmurs, deliberately avoiding looking into Madoka's eyes. Her tail unconsciously hits the bed as she slowly withdraws her hand.

"Meow," Amy interrupts, headbutting Homura in the cheek. "Meow."

Whatever Amy says has Homura glaring, and just as she turns to reply, Madoka reaches for Homura's hand.

Homura blinks, annoyance disappearing as she focuses nervous eyes on Madoka.

Madoka repositions Homura's arms around her waist, before she settles against Homura, placing her head on her shoulder, "Homura-chan...?"

A few seconds pass, before Homura slowly relaxes. "...Yes, Madoka?"

She closes her eyes. "...What's going to happen now?"

Homura sucks in a breath, ignoring the uncomfortable strain in her chest. She tries to form an answer, but comes up short when she's not sure what Madoka is specifically asking.

"...Sayaka-chan..." Madoka presses her face against Homura's collarbone, muffling her voice. "Was... Will they really not find her...?"

Homura pauses, but exhales slowly, knowing that Madoka deserved to know. "...It depends. If—someone had managed to carry her out of the barrier, then... Otherwise, she will be classified as a missing person..."

Madoka bunches her fingers in, gripping Homura's shirt tightly. "No one would know...? Sayaka-chan... Her parents...? Kamijou-kun—he'd never know what she did for him...?"

Homura shakes her head. "No... but, that's the fate all magical girls face..."

"That's..." Madoka cuts herself off, knowing if she continued with those words, she'd start crying again. She swallows several times, trying to force that lump back down her throat.

Absently, Homura rubs her cheek against Madoka's head, emitting a small rumble to try and comfort her.

Madoka sighs softly, readjusting herself against Homura. "Homura-chan...?"

"Hm...?"

"Then, Hitomi-chan too...?"

"...Yes."

Madoka draws in a shaky breath. "What—" her voice cracks, and she swallows again, growing frustrated as she brushes tears away. "What can we do? How can I help?"

Homura falls once more into silence. She knows Madoka well enough that even if she told her to not worry about it, she would. Even if she had promised, that chance still existed.

Unconsciously, her throat rumbles again.

It isn't until Madoka holds her tightly, reversing their roles, that she realizes that she has started crying.

"Meow."

Amy bumps her head gently. Embarrassed, she quickly wipes at her eyes with her hand.

She breaths in deeply, "...I don't know." Her voice is honest and raw, enough so that Madoka pulls away to look at her.

"Homura-chan...?"

Homura takes Madoka's hand, holding it close to her cheek as she closes her eyes. "...No matter what I did, I could never convince you to not make your wish..." She opens her eyes, face tear stained as she stares at Madoka. "You're probably thinking about how you can fix this... what kind of wish you could make to fix everything."

Madoka feels her chest constrict as the guilt from Homura's defeated tone washes over her. "I—what else can I do?" she whispers desperately. "Sayaka-chan—" she swallows down her sob, "Sayaka-chan's dead. Hitomi-chan's dead." She locks eyes with Homura, "you're dying." She can feel something unravel— "you're dying, Homura-chan," she repeats, tone a lot more clear; a lot more pained.

Homura stares at her, before her head dips down slightly, "...I am."

"...But, you want me to pretend that—that I'll be okay; that I'll be okay with my world falling apart around me—while I do nothing as I watch my friends die in front of me. As I watch—" she cuts herself off, teeth gnashing together as she chokes down another sob, "as I watch you die."

Homura flicks her ears, nervous. "I'm no one," she says softly, those words hurting her more than the pain in her heart ever could. "When this is all over, you should... forget about wishes and magical girls, and continue to live your life. I'm—just a small part of your life." She gives Madoka a soft smile, hand gentle as it brushes the stray tears from Madoka's cheek. "You'll graduate in a year, and enter high school. You'll—make new friends, new ones that will make you laugh and smile again. I'm—someone like me, should have never met someone as bright as you—"

And Madoka is suddenly moving. She's on top of Homura, straddling her as her arms come down against the sides of her head.

She leans down, eyes narrowed, chest burning as white hot anger flares out. "YOU don't get to decide who gets to forget you," she hisses harshly, voice low, "YOU don't get to decide how much value you have in someone's life. YOU—" Homura trembles in fear, and Madoka's resolution breaks as her face crumples. "You—" her voice drops to a whisper, "you don't get to decide who loves you."

She lowers her body, collapsing against Homura as she finally breaks down.

Homura remains unmoving as Madoka sobs against her.

"Meow," Amy bats a paw into her cheek, as if reprimanding her. "Meow..."

Hands shaking, Homura finally wraps her arms around Madoka. It only serves to make the sobs increase.

The apology sits on the tip of her tongue, but she knows they're not words that Madoka wants to hear. Her throat rumbles, joining the chorus of Madoka's cries as they fill the room.

Amy crawls over, draping her body over Homura's neck, offering the smallest bit of comfort as both girls cry.

\\

Rivulets of crimson trickle down her arm, flowing like small streams that branch and part, and then empty into the ocean of red that sits at her feet. Her head feels light, and the spear embedded in the ground is supporting half her weight.

She angrily flicks her bangs from her eyes, wiping sweat and blood from her forehead. "I'll admit, you've definitely gotten better—but only by a little."

She grins, surveying the damage found along Sayaka's Witch form: her helmet is dented, open wounds bleed in blue and grey, and a portion of her tail hangs on only by a small thread; it sways precariously as Sayaka continues to move, still conducting that orchestra of hers.

The music though, is not as frenzied, and not as loud. Every so often, a few notes are either too sharp, or fall too flat; Sayaka is losing control.

Kyouko taps into her soul gem, letting the magic flow through her body. It numbs the pain, letting her breathe just a little bit easier.

"And through all that, you still haven't said anything." She pulls her spear from the ground, only stumbling slightly when her support disappears. "How are you going to apologize to me, huh, if you're not going to say anything?"

She positions her spear in front of her when she sees Sayaka's readying to attack.

"You don't know how much Mami's worrying about you—how much Pinky is crying over you because you gave up."

She waits, body tense as Sayaka starts to move.

"Wake up, Sayaka." Her voice is no longer angry. "Wake up already."

One gauntlet hand shoots up, and Kyouko tenses when three wooden wheels materialize in thin air. They spin, and when they gain enough momentum, they suddenly dart in Kyouko's direction.

She slices across, easily cutting one in half, and quickly brings her spear up to block the next one.

Cymbals clash, and it distracts Kyouko enough that she's unable to dodge the third wheel that bounces, and barrels straight for her.

"Oof!" Her breath is knocked from her lungs, and she flies back, grip on her weapon slackening from the impact. She tumbles heavily on the floor, sliding, and there's a clang as her spear lands a small distance away. Before she can reach for it, another wheel whizzes past, and knowing that another one will follow, she scrambles to her

feet. Slick with blood, her hand slips and her jaw smacks into the ground as another wheel passes overhead.

She struggles to right herself up, and just as her knees dig into carpet, something whistles by her ear, right before sharp pain blossoms from her leg.

With wide eyes, she tilts her head back, eyes now staring at the sword embedded in her calf.

Swallowing back a scream, she quickly turns to Sayaka, evaluating her body language to estimate how much time she has until the next attack. A split second later, she searches for her weapon, and she finds it—close enough, but still too far.

Her link to her soul gem is severed, and she hits the ground running, fingers already outstretched and reaching.

The crescendo hits, and she doesn't feel anything when two more swords nick and graze across her skin. She dives forward, and a second later, her hand lands on the handle of her weapon. Her fingers wrap around it tightly, and she uses the momentum of her movement to roll her body forward. Her shoulder briefly impacts the ground, and her vision is upside down, right before returning to normal.

Breathing heavily, she kneels with one knee to the floor, eyes narrowed as she waits for Sayaka's next move.

Her eyes unconsciously start to close, and she shakes her head, eyes quickly opening as she forces herself to wake up. She knows that she has expended too much magic—her gem needs to be cleaned, and she needs to just sit, and just catch her breath for a minute or ten. A little bit of pride blooms in her chest: Sayaka is strong, and she knows she had helped her become that way.

But, too bad it isn't the kind of strength that any of them had wanted.

Sayaka does a wide sweeping gesture, and Kyouko pushes off the ground, prepared to run. Her legs fold underneath her, knees slamming into the ground as they're unable to support her weight.

The first sword grazes her arm, adding another thin, red line amongst the rest that pepper her body.

The second sword is more accurate, and with wide eyes, she brings a trembling hand to her chest. The blade shines grey, before a coat of red spills over. She chokes as blood fills her lungs, and a strangled gurgle is the only sound she can make when she senses movement. She can only watch as Sayaka raises her hands once more, readying for that downward sweep that signals another attack.

Time seems to slow, and her body pitches forward as her eyes start to close. The spear falls from her hand, and there's a muddled thud reverberating in her ears.

'I get it, Sayaka. Out of everyone, I understand you the most. It's lonely, isn't it? It hurts, doesn't it? You're angry at everyone; at the world.'

As her eyesight blurs and doubles, Sayaka lowers her hands—

'If this'll help you somehow—if taking out your anger on me helps you, then…'

She braces herself, eyes finally closing as the tears she has held back breaks free.

'Please, God, even if I won't make it to Heaven, then at least—'

Her body shudders as she struggles to draw in another breath.

"KYOUKO!"

With the last of her strength, she forces her eyes open; eyelids heavy, she can barely make out a golden blur, right before the room flashes with a bright, brilliant light. Her eyes shut close, and body numb, she vaguely feels something wrap around her.

The room suddenly spins as she's pulled back rapidly. Deja vu hits, but the floor isn't moving underneath her feet, it's just her vision swimming in her head. The last thing she feels is her darkened world tilting and swaying, until there's nothing more.

\\

She wakes to cold cement underneath her. Through lidded eyes, she finds Mami hovering over her, hands extended, bright, and glowing.

"Don't worry, Kyouko, you'll be okay."

The corner of her mouth raises in a half snarl, "m'fin."

"Don't speak," Mami tells her, voice sharp and scolding.

She's still too weak to move, and finding the light hurts her eyes, all she can do is turn her head away.

"You'll be okay. You'll be okay," Mami continues to whisper over and over again.

The pressure in her chest slowly fades, and as soon as she can, Kyouko reaches for Mami's wrist. "Stop."

Mami frowns down at her. "You need to be healed—"

"I can finish the rest." She clears her throat. "I'm fine." There's a bit more bite to her words, and after a moment, Mami relents.

She draws her hands away, but wordlessly reaches into her skirt pocket to pull out a familiar tin.

Kyouko is about to summon her soul gem when a grief seed is pushed under her nose. She squints at Mami, and the uncharacteristic grim expression makes her accept.

"Thanks," she mumbles.

Relief floods Mami's face, and the sudden guilt gnawing at her stomach makes Kyouko quickly look away. The area briefly shines red as her soul gem materializes in her hands.

Mami falls into silence, letting Kyouko concentrate as she heals. She knows it's only a matter of time; as soon as she stops, Mami speaks.

"...I told you to wait for me, didn't I?"

She sighs, offering the used grief seed to Mami as she prolongs her answer.

The spent grief seed disappears into its container, and Mami once again stares at her, lips pressed into a thin line.

"...Hasn't anyone ever told you that if you frown too much, your face will get stuck?"

"Kyouko."

She sighs; she's exhausted, and a lecture is the last thing she wants to hear. She flops down on the floor, feeling the surface press into her back. Even through the layers of clothing, it's cool to the touch, and soothes her fevered body. She throws one arm over her face, using it to block the light.

"Kyouko?"

She chooses not to say anything, instead swallowing heavily as she ignores the way her eyes once again itch.

"...Akemi-chan and Madoka-chan are back."

She abruptly pulls her arm away. Her eyes are narrowed slits as they focus on Mami, "...did she say anything?"

Mami bows her head, "...no."

She turns away, wanting nothing more than to be left alone. "Figures."

"They're resting at the moment, but may be able to meet up with us later."

Kyouko slams her fist into the ground, ignoring how pain spikes up her arm. "Later, huh?"

Mami sighs. "It's harder for them—Madoka-chan's family—"

"*I know*."

Her words cut deep, and silence washes over them, both now lost in their thoughts as they're reminded of things they no longer have.

Mami takes a deep breath, and just as she's about to speak, a sound from Kyouko interrupts. She blinks as Kyouko shifts, placing a hand to her stomach as she tries to stop it from growling.

"...Would you like to get something to eat?"

Her nerves still tingle from lingering pain, and the crash of cymbals still reverberates in her ears; she presses her fingers down, feeling the rumble in her stomach sound off once more.

She pulls her arm away, and it takes a brief moment until she is able to focus her eyes on Mami's face. "...D'you think we could've save her?"

Mami stares at her, golden eyes hard. "We already did."

Kyouko inhales sharply. She shuts her eyes close, chest hurting as the tears finally fall. She doesn't make a sound, and when arms try to wrap around, she pushes away.

"Don't touch me!"

"We saved her, Kyouko."

"You killed her!"

"Like what she was going to do to you?"

"It would've been better—" her words cut off as she's suddenly lifted off her feet, only to be shoved back roughly into the brick wall to their side. Dust sprinkles down, and behind her messy bangs, crimson eyes matches the glow of gold.

Mami glares at her, fingers digging into her shoulders. "I would've done the same for you." They glare at each other for a few more seconds, before Mami finally lets go. "...and I would expect you to do the same for me."

Kyouko leans heavily against the wall, letting her body slide down until she's now sitting on the ground. "So that's it then; that's how it'll end for us."

Instead of replying, Mami takes a seat next to her. She's quiet as she lifts Kyouko's hand, only to place something cold and metal in her palm.

Kyouko turns to her, scowling. She grips the grief seed in her hand, and the temptation to crush it grows with every passing second.

"Kyouko."

Her eyebrows furrow when she sees Mami nod at her hand. Agitated, and maybe a little curious, she finally looks down.

Shadows cover them from head to toe; the glint of metal is dull, and she raises her hand, bringing it closer to the light.

She chokes on air when she realizes what she's looking at.

"Are you giving up?" Mami asks her, voice soft.

Those words strike something within her, and Kyouko feels laughter bubble up. She closes her eyes, hand grasping the item in her hand almost tenderly. She shakes her head, mind trying to wrap around the situation.

Eventually, she sits up, and the weight against her chest feels lighter, somehow. "...Don't you know, Mami?"

Mami turns to her, face apprehensive. "Know what, Kyouko?"

A genuine grin spreads across Kyouko's face as the irony hits hard. She holds the grief seed in her palm, her thumb gently tracing the musical notes etched on the surface.

"Heroes... never give u**p."**

AN: To the 5 people who are still reading, we'll slowly get through this. Maybe. Thank youu for reading and for any reviews. Hope you're all doing well.

*re-enters hibernation full of mdhm dreams zzz

Chapter 31: home

She blinks slowly, slightly confused as her vision gains focus. She blinks again, suddenly conscious of the puffiness of her eyes, of the tautness on her cheeks. After another moment, she sluggishly brings her arm up, and uses her jacket sleeve to wipe her face.

A deep inhale, before she turns, finally acknowledging the owner of the raspy, slow breath heard in her ear. She pushes off from the bed ever so slightly, enough for a glimpse of Homura's face: in the midst of sleep, but she looks neither relaxed, nor peaceful. Every so often, her black cat ears twitch, controlled by whatever she sees in her dreams.

Traces of tears remain on her face, and she reaches over to wipe them away. A twinkle of metal, and a shine of sliver around her wrist catches her eye.

Her hand stops.

It isn't long until she moves again, and carefully wipes the drying tears from Homura's cheeks. When Homura frowns, and tries to escape by turning her head into the blankets, Madoka cracks a smile.

She continues to watch Homura for a while longer. Her eyes flicker down, and she knows, somewhere hidden underneath those blankets, Homura wears her own identical bracelet.

She lifts her hand, and places it close to her heart. Even if Homura keeps pushing her away, there are things that shows it's the opposite of what she really wants.

With a sigh, Madoka carefully fits herself against Homura's side; her eyes are starting to feel heavy.

She closes her eyes.

Half asleep, and she's suddenly jolted awake. She reluctantly detaches herself from Homura, sitting up as she searches for whatever had woken her up. She sweeps her messy bangs to the side, head turning in confusion. A sharp beep to her right, and she realizes it was her phone.

"Nngh..."

Homura rolls over, bed lightly bouncing with her movement. Madoka turns to her, and there's a brief peek of lavender, before Homura shuts her eyes closed, and buries her face back into the blankets.

Another sharp beep, and Homura twitches in response.

Madoka gently pats Homura's shoulder, but just as Homura lifts her head, the silence breaks with a loud buzz against the wall. Madoka moves quickly to the source, crawling over the blankets to locate her phone.

When the buzzing continues, Homura echoes her discontent.

"Shhh," Madoka murmurs softly as she continues her search.

A few plushies are lifted, and after another moment, she finds her phone wedged in between the mattress and the wall.

She grabs it, and the buzz turns into a muted hum against her hand. Homura immediately quiets down, curling her body against the blankets in order to fall back asleep.

Madoka takes a deep breath, and then flips her phone over, screen up.

Mami's name blinks back.

Just as she's about to answer, the sound cuts off, and the screen shows the icon of a missed call.

The long stretch of silence is unexpected, and Homura slowly sits up. She finds Madoka staring hard at her phone. "...Madoka?"

She breathes out slowly, "...it's Mami-chan," she murmurs in response.

Now more awake, Homura hesitates on her next move. Unsure if Madoka is still mad, she tentatively moves closer.

Before she can voice her question, Madoka turns, and slips her arms around Homura's waist.

They lean against each other, sitting in silence as Madoka takes a moment to collect herself. Another deep breath, before she reluctantly pulls away.

Head bowed, Homura nervously fidgets with her hands. Sensing that she wants to ask something, Madoka patiently waits.

"Madoka...?"

"Yes, Homura-chan?"

Timidly, she raises her eyes. Her ears remain flat on her head, and Madoka resists the temptation to reach out to pet them.

"Are... you still mad?"

Madoka meets her gaze. "At?" She keeps her voice level.

Homura looks down again. "...Me?"

Madoka inhales deeply, before letting her breath billow out. She reaches for Homura's hands, grabbing them, and turning them over, palm facing up.

"Do you... even know why I was mad, Homura-chan?" She waits for Homura to look up again, and when she does, she catches her in her stare, refusing to let her look away.

"I—" Homura tries to remember their conversation. "...I'm—"

"An important person in my life," Madoka tells her softly.

Homura tries to pull her hands away, but Madoka refuses to let go.

"I—"

Homura flinches when the phone suddenly springs to life.

With a sigh, Madoka drops Homura's hands, instead reaching over to stroke her ears. She eyes her phone, counting the rings in her head.

"...I can answer," Homura offers after a moment.

Madoka pauses, but just as Homura is about to move, she reaches for it first. She swipes the screen, and then places the phone by her ear. "...Mami-chan?" She glances at Homura, vaguely noticing her now restless tail.

"Madoka-chan? How are you doing?"

"I'm—"

"We're—Kyouko—let me—Hey!"

Madoka pulls the phone away as loud rustling hits her eardrums. She can hear Kyouko's distinctive voice arguing with Mami's much more reserved one. After a loud bang that makes both girls jump, "we need to meet up," Kyouko demands suddenly. "*Now*."

Madoka glances around her room, stalling as she decides on her answer. Her gaze lands on her desk clock. It's still early—barely mid-afternoon; they had slept for less than two hours.

"...Okay."

"Y-Yeah?" Kyouko's anger deflates at the accepted request. She clears her throat, "okay, good."

"...I need to ask my mom first, but as soon as we can, we'll be over."

"Yup—yeah. Hurry up."

Madoka listens for a few more seconds, and she hears a heavy sigh, before there's a click, disconnecting their call. She slowly lowers the phone to her lap.

"We can rest longer, if you want..."

Madoka shakes her head. She sighs softly, "...I just have to convince Mama to let us visit Mami-chan."

Homura falls silent, ears flattening against her head.

Lost in her thoughts, Madoka absently plays with her phone, turning the device over and over in her hands. She stops when she hears something hit the bed. Curious, she turns, and catches a glimpse of black just as Homura's tail comes down again, making a small thump against the mattress.

"...I'll think of something, Homura-chan."

Homura immediately stops. She nods, and then gives Madoka another hesitant glance.

Before she can say anything, "...we'll continue our other conversation later."

Hearing this, Homura visibly droops, tail now limp at her side; she had been hoping Madoka would just let it go. She looks up, but freezes when she finds Madoka staring at her.

Madoka extends her arm, moving slowly, knowing Homura doesn't do well with unexpected surprises. She gently places her hand on Homura's cheek, and absently wipes a tearful remnant with her thumb.

Homura swallows nervously, tail and ears now flicking about.

Madoka leans forward, trying to judge Homura's reaction. Fear, nervousness—

She's frozen in her spot, but, Madoka knows that Homura has never told her she hates it.

She kisses Homura's cheek, before pulling away. She stares into Homura's eyes, and slowly withdraws her hand.

"...I'll wash up, and then talk to Mama."

As Madoka moves to the edge of the bed, Homura follows her with her eyes. Madoka turns, giving her a small smile, and then slowly walks to the door.

When Madoka is gone, and she's finally alone, Homura remembers she should be breathing. She takes in a gulp of air, and places her hands on her warm face.

Just as she's starting to calm down, a sound makes her look up.

"...Meow."

She turns as Amy enters through the window.

"Meow."

Homura sits up straighter, curiosity now peaked.

Amy hops onto the bed, but Homura quickly holds out her arm.

"N-Not on the blankets, Madoka will get mad..."

Amy stares for a moment, tail swishing left and right, before she jumps down to the floor. As she takes a seat, Homura scoots off the bed to sit in front of her.

"I brought you some snacks from Tokyo," Homura murmurs absently, still eying the object in Amy's mouth. "We can have some later..."

Amy's ears perk up, and she quickly lowers her head, mouth opening to deposit her gift on the floor. "Meow."

Homura quickly glances to the door; she can hear footsteps approaching.

"Meow."

She turns back, hands hovering.

Amy makes another noise, this time in warning. Homura feels her mouth water, and just as she's about to pounce—

"Homura-chan-" Mid-stride, Madoka stops when she sees Homura on the floor, with Amy sitting in front of her. "Homura-chan!"

Homura flinches, immediately sitting up and placing her hands in her lap.

Amy meows in response, before scooping up the small mouse into her mouth.

"A-Amy—"

"*Homura-chan*."

Homura bows her head. Amy quickly jumps onto the bed, and a second later, she disappears out the window as Homura watches her leave. With great difficulty, she turns back, only to find Madoka now standing in front of her.

"...Homura-chan."

Homura's hand curls in, and she brings it up to her face, rubbing it against her cheek.

Madoka sighs. She drops down to match Homura's height. "...Are you hungry? Mama says she's almost done with her work. She'll take us over to Mami-chan's for a bit, and then we can go eat something. Can you wait?"

Finally realizing what she's doing, Homura forces her hand back down. "That's—fine..."

Absently, Madoka takes a second to look around her room; it hasn't changed at all, and they were only gone for a few days, but for some reason, it feels like she's sitting in someone else's room.

"...Homura-chan."

Homura flinches again, and this time, Madoka reaches over to stroke her ears.

"...Would you like some milk?"

When she immediately brightens, Madoka smiles in amusement.

Homura clears her throat, lowering her eyes to the floor. "I'm—I'm okay," she murmurs, trying to appear nonchalant.

She's failing miserably.

Madoka leans against her, and pulls her in close. "Are you sure? I promised you earlier that you could have some; Mama mentioned Papa had bought some strawberry milk, too."

Homura tenses, tail now swaying from side to side. "I'm—" she glances over, "can... I have some milk...?"

Madoka nods, "sure, Homura-chan."

Homura turns to press her face against Madoka's.

"But—"

She freezes.

"...Put your ears and tail away first."

Now blushing, Homura tries to rein in her emotions. "Right..." After her ears and tail disappear, she glances to Madoka again, seeking permission to move.

Madoka turns to her, waiting until a few moments pass, before, "let's get some milk, Homura-chan."

Homura is immediately on her feet, and just about to rush out the door when she stops.

"A-After you, Madoka," she tells her, stepping back to let Madoka catch up.

Madoka slowly stands. When she reaches Homura, she grabs her hand, and pulls her along. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

As they walk out the door, Homura sneaks a wistful glance to the window.

"Homura-chan."

She faces forward, knowing she had been caught when Madoka is a bit more forceful as she drags her out the door.

"Milk, Homura-chan."

"...Okay."

/

Soon still feels far too early, and yet, almost two hours have passed since Mami's initial phone call.

Kyouko hadn't been too thrilled at the delay, but Madoka had explained to her that she had to wait until her mother was free, otherwise they wouldn't be allowed to visit. After a tense moment, she had conceded.

And soon had happened—is now happening.

As Junko drives them to Mami's, she keeps the conversation light, deliberately straying from any sensitive topics. Eventually, the radio is turned on, and the music fills in the silence that neither girls can fill with their voices.

When they reach the high rise apartments, Junko pulls the car into the loading zone.

"Mama needs to make a few phone calls, so I'll wait around the corner until you're done," Junko tells them as they exit the car. "Do you know how long you'll be?"

Madoka places her hands behind her back, rustling the small paper bag she's holding. "I'm not sure..." she glances to Homura who's standing next to her.

"...Not that long," Homura murmurs in response. "We just need to pass out souvenirs, and chat for a bit."

Junko hums in response. She glances to her rear view mirror, noticing that another car is pulling up. "Alright, I'll find a parking spot nearby. I'll text you where I'm parked, but if you don't see me, just call. "

"Okay," Madoka says, stepping back. "We'll be done soon, Mama."

Junko gives them a small wave, before she clicks the turn signal, and drives her car forward.

When the waiting car pulls up to the curb, Madoka turns around, reaching with her free hand to grab Homura's. They share a look, before they move to approach the front of the building. As they pass the sensor, the doors slide open to reveal the large reception area inside. Cool air hits them as they enter, lightly coated with the scent of flowers. Madoka breathes in, absently trying to the pinpoint the smell: lavender, mixed with something else. The room is empty, and they continue further in, passing the rows of mail boxes, each marked with numbers for each corresponding apartment. Towards the back, they finally reach the elevator that will take them to Mami's floor.

They wait in silence, and only when they're confined inside the elevator, does Madoka finally turn to Homura.

"Homura-chan." Surrounded by glass, her voice softly echoes in their ears.

Homura glances over.

"...Will you tell them the truth?"

Homura looks away, gaze distant as the elevator lifts them higher. The surrounding walls are suddenly clear, revealing a view of the streets below, slowly growing smaller as they ascend.

She still has not responded when the ding signals their stop, and they slow to a halt as they reach the correct floor.

The doors slide open with a brief rumble, and they exit. This high up, and the air is crisp and cool.

The elevator door closes behind them, but Homura has yet to move.

"...Homura-chan?"

She's mentally preparing herself for what may happen, running the different scenarios in her mind. How will it end this time?

"Homura-chan!"

She blinks. She's back in the present, her face in Madoka's hands as clear, rose pink stares straight into her eyes.

"...Madoka?"

"Are you okay? We can leave, if you want to."

She blinks again. After a long pause, she reaches for Madoka's hands. As she gently pulls them away, she is once again reminded how they are smaller than hers.

"Homura-chan?"

She shakes herself from her thoughts, and finally meets Madoka's worried gaze. "I'm okay. Let's—see what happens."

Madoka searches her face, and is more than a little frustrated when all she can see is Homura's mask. She reluctantly relents, instead switching her grip to once again hold Homura's hand.

"Okay," she replies. "Let's go."

A hesitant step, before they start moving forward.

When they reach the apartment labeled with Mami's nameplate, they give a polite knock, and wait for a response. When there's no answer, they glance at each other, before they check the door. Finding it unlocked, they enter the familiar apartment.

Inside, no one is there to greet them.

Slightly confused, as they had messaged ahead, they close the door behind them, and proceed to take off their shoes. As they step over the threshold, Madoka calls out. Just as she's about to reach for her phone, Homura turns to face the hallway. After another moment, Madoka can hear pounding footsteps further inside, until Kyouko is suddenly there, appearing in the doorway. Her hair is unkempt, long strands a tangled mess as dark circles sit underneath her eyes.

When she sees Homura however, her whole face darkens, and the weariness vanishes without a trace. Energy suddenly thrums around her, enough so that even Madoka can feel it crackling in the air. She steps back, wanting nothing more than to turn around, and go home.

"...Who are you?" Kyouko asks, voice low, deep—dangerous.

Accusing.

Madoka takes another involuntary step back at the animosity, but Homura does not back down.

"How do you know so much about us?" Kyouko demands. "How did you know what would happen?" She switches gears, "how do you have all that info on Witches, on Walpurgisnacht?"

Homura does not answer, instead glancing behind Kyouko. Mami has appeared from the kitchen, looking ready to step in at a moment's notice.

"I'm talking to you!"

There's enough time for Homura to react, and even retaliate. She instead braces herself as a blur of red shoots forward, hands grabbing her shirt, pushing her backwards. She stumbles, and there's a brief moment of weightlessness as she's lifted, before she winces as she's slammed against the small table placed by the entrance.

The rooms shakes, and the sound of shattering ceramic echoes in their ears; two houseplants have fallen, and a third leans precariously on the edge of the table.

With wide eyes, Madoka whirls around to face them, "Homura-chan!"

"Kyouko!"

Kyouko ignores their voices, and presses her fingers harder against Homura's throat. Crimson eyes darken—and Homura realizes it's been a while since she has seen Kyouko this close to her breaking point.

"What did you wish for?" Kyouko demands.

Mami is a step away and ready to pull Kyouko off; Madoka right behind her.

Homura meets Kyouko's glare head on. Her lip curls up, "...I wanted to be a hero."

Kyouko inhales sharply, grip slackening. She doesn't resist as Mami's hand winds around her forearm, pulling her back. Madoka steps past them and tends to Homura, who is now using the small table to support her weight.

The third houseplant falls, and they all wince at the sound.

"Kyouko," Mami's voice is laced with disappointment.

Kyouko hunches over; all the fight has left her, and she shoves her hand into her jacket pocket.

"Homura-chan, are you okay?" Madoka wraps her arms around Homura, watching as she rubs at her throat. She frowns when she sees glimpses of red impressions marring Homura's pale skin.

She turns to glare at Kyouko.

"I'm fine," Homura says softly. She gently bumps Madoka with her head, and after another moment, she faces Mami and Kyouko. "What happened while we were gone?"

Kyouko stares at the floor, refusing to answer.

Homura turns to Mami instead. "Tomoe Mami."

Mami keeps her hand around Kyouko's arm, even though she knows she won't try anything for now.

"We—" she cuts herself off, remembering that darkened room, and Sayaka's last moments. "...We were out hunting when we noticed Sayaka's signature moving across the city. We gave chase," she looks at Madoka, trying her best to convey her regret, "...but ultimately, we were too late. She—" a flash of red, and she pushes the thoughts away, barely able to keep the bile down. "...She hatched into a Witch shortly after we reached her."

Madoka feels her anger evaporating, replaced by a numbness that spreads over her body. "Sayaka-chan..."

Homura eyes Mami warily, looking for signs of a potential breakdown; she's surprised when clear golden eyes bore into hers. She focuses back to Kyouko, and she's the one that looks more than a little unraveled.

Kyouko finally withdraws her hand from her pocket, and the metallic object she's holding catches the light from the windows.

It is like any other grief seed she has seen, but Madoka knows. She sucks in a deep breath, unable to tear her eyes away from one of the remaining remnants of her best friend. The pressure builds in the back of her eyes, and she shields her face with her hands.

Her legs shake, and Homura is there, holding her close, supporting her weight.

Careful of the surrounding broken shards, Homura moves them further inside. "Madoka?"

There's a deep ache in her chest, and she takes in a large gulp of air.

"Pinky."

The soft voice has her pulling her hands away. Through a blur of red and green as tears cloud her vision, there's brief glimpses as Kyouko approaches, hand held out.

"...Sorry."

The apology only makes the air heavier. She shakes her head, unable to bring herself to touch Sayaka's grief seed.

"Sayaka-chan..." It just reminds her of the unanswered message in her phone—reminds her that when she goes to school again, two desks will be empty—and other than those in this room, no one else will know what had happened.

Kyouko suddenly grabs her hand, and deposits the grief seed onto her open palm. "...You knew her longer—you should have it."

Even if you don't deserve it.

It's unsaid, but Madoka can see it reflecting in Kyouko's eyes.

The guilt comes crashing back down, and she turns to bury her face into Homura's shoulder.

Kyouko takes a step back. Her hands return to her pockets, folding into fists as she tries to ignore the sudden emptiness.

"Kitty Cat."

Homura acknowledges Kyouko with a glance.

"...Could we have saved her?"

They stare at one another, and if it had been, maybe three weeks ago, the answer would have easily rolled off Homura's tongue. Now, and after so long, she can finally recognize that subtle look in Kyouko's eyes—she's not looking for the cold hard truth—she's looking for validation of her actions.

A reason to continue her fight.

Homura breaks eye contact, her gaze unconsciously drawn to Madoka. That familiar ache in her chest grows, and she presses her cheek against Madoka's head. After a brief moment, she looks at Kyouko.

"...Do you think you saved her?" she asks instead.

Kyouko doesn't give a response, leaving the question to hang in the air.

"Of course we did."

All three turn to Mami, whose clear voice interrupts the tense silence.

"We saved her," she insists, setting her jaw. She glares, as if daring anyone to doubt her words.

Madoka pulls away from Homura to stare at Sayaka's grief seed cradled in her hand. She traces the symbols etched onto the surface, immediately recognizing them to be musical notes.

Of course they would be.

She lifts her head, and her eyes meet golden, "Mami-chan," before they then cut across to crimson, "Kyouko-chan."

She's acknowledged with a curious look, and a much more guarded one.

"Thank you."

Both sets of eyes widen at Madoka's sincerity.

"I..." she swallows back that lump in her throat, "I couldn't be there for Sayaka-chan, but," she gives them a sad smile, "you two were." She holds Sayaka's remnant close to her chest, and bows her head, "thank you. I couldn't stop her, but I know that if Sayaka had hurt anyone else, even if she didn't mean to, that—she never would've forgiven herself."

Kyouko glares at the floor, "don't thank us."

"Kyouko-chan—"

"I said—don't thank us!" She takes an angry step forward, hands now bunched to her sides.

"Kyouko—"

Kyouko shoves Mami away, and her eyes are desperate as she meets Madoka's kind ones. "Seaweed girl—we—"

"—I know."

Kyouko freezes as Mami does the same.

"I... heard. Thank you... I know you two tried your best to save them both."

Kyouko looks away, feeling shame wash over her. "I saw her," she croaks out, voice hoarse. "She was alive—we ate ramen." Her hand comes up to cover her face, "we ate spicy ramen and she actually kept up with me." Her laugh is hollow. She cuts herself off, gritting her teeth. "Damnit."

Madoka glances down to Sayaka's grief seed as a sudden, fond memory hits her. "...A few years back, Hitomi-chan won first place in a spicy food contest." She wipes away a stray tear, smiling as she remembers. "Sayaka-chan entered too, and forfeited after two minutes." Another tear falls.

Kyouko opens her mouth, "I'm sor—"

"Don't." Madoka's voice is hard as she glares at Kyouko. "Don't apologize for trying your hardest. Don't apologize for trying to save someone's life." She holds Kyouko's gaze for a few more seconds, before she turns to Homura.

Homura flinches at the sudden attention. She bows her head to avoid eye contact. Madoka gently takes her hand, squeezing it once, before turning back to Kyouko and Mami.

She takes a deep breath, "I know, it's not worth much, not after everything you three have sacrificed, but..." she bows her body the lowest it can go, "thank you."

Mami's eyes fill with tears. "Madoka-chan—we're not, we're—" she glances to Kyouko helplessly, only to find the other girl now scowling.

"The hell... are you thanking us for?" Kyouko spits out. "We couldn't save them—they're dead. They DIED."

Madoka straightens up, and immediately turns to Homura to hug her close. "...They did."

A look of betrayal flashes across Kyouko's face.

"They're dead," Madoka repeats, voice soft. "They're gone," her voice is steady, clear. "And, no matter how many times you apologize... they won't come back."

Kyouko feels something snap. "You—could've saved her! If you had stayed, you could have talked her out of it!" She's grasping at straws—angry at someone—something—anyone.

Herself.

Homura narrows her eyes, a sharp retort at the tip of her tongue. She stops when a firm hand presses on her back.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka keeps her head held up high, not backing down from Kyouko's accusations. "Do you think Sayaka-chan would've listened to me?"

"She-she would've—"

Madoka shakes her head. "Sayaka-chan's stubborn. She's loyal, and kind, and... she was my best friend."

Kyouko's eyes burn at the use of past tense.

"Sayaka-chan... would've never listened to me. I couldn't stop her from making her wish, and I wasn't here when she needed me the most. But she," she brings her sleeve up to wipe away the tears, "she... wouldn't have listened to me anyways. She... probably only lasted as long as she did because of you and Mami-chan." She glances down to her hand.

"She..." Kyouko draws back, anger fading. "We were so close..." she whispers.

Just as Madoka opens her mouth, a sudden knock on the door stops her short. All four turn just as the knob twists, and the door is slowly pushed open.

Junko pops her head in, and Madoka breathes a small sigh of relief when she double checks to make sure Homura hasn't accidentally summoned her ears.

Another second, and she realizes she should somehow diffuse the situation. "Mama?"

Junko waves, and gives the girls a disarming smile. "Sorry to interrupt, but," she holds up her phone, "you weren't answering, Madoka."

Madoka realizes she had forgot to turn the volume back on after she had turned it off to avoid Kyouko's calls.

"Ah... sorry about that, Mama."

Junko gives her a look, but she quickly switches to another smile. "Are you almost done here, Madoka? We need to leave soon to make it to the restaurant on time."

"Right—" Madoka tries to discreetly place Sayaka's grieef seed in her pocket, using Homura to block her actions from her mom.

"Ah, I apologize for keeping you," Mami says as she bows lightly. She turns to Madoka, "you—should get going, Madoka-chan. I'll see you two in school?"

Junko grins, "well, you'll probably see them a bit earlier than that."

Mami blinks in confusion.

"I made reservations for all of us," Junko clarifies. "I can always cancel if you don't want to come along, but the offer stands."

Caught off-guard, Mami shakes her head, "ah, we wouldn't want to impose..."

Junko waves away her excuse. "You wouldn't be. We're already going to eat something —adding two more people won't hurt," she says with a wink.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Mami murmurs as she gives Kyouko a side glance.

As if on cue, Kyouko's stomach growls, and she quickly places a hand to her stomach. "Er..."

Junko smiles, "well, I guess that means Kyouko-chan is in. How about you, Mami-chan?"

"Ah... well..." She looks again to Kyouko, who gives a half-hearted shrug. "Ah..." Something about Junko's kind expression makes her unable to say no.

At her acceptance, Junko's smile turns into a grin. "Great! We can leave then as soon as you're all ready." She casts a quick look around the room, eyes lingering on the mess by the door, "...I'll head down first since I need to make another phone call. You girls can come down once you're done. Don't take too long, okay?"

She takes another look at Madoka.

"Sure, Mama." She clears her throat, and turns to Mami, "uhmmmm, Mami-chan, can I use your restroom?"

"Ah, sure, Madoka-chan."

Junko gives an acknowledging nod, and then disappears out the door.

Once the door is clicked shut, everyone lets out a sigh of relief.

Knowing her mom is waiting, Madoka forces herself to move. She spots the small paper bag nearby, and scoops it up, before approaching Mami. "Mami-chan, we—brought some souvenirs from Tokyo..." She holds the bag out.

Surprised, Mami accepts the gift. "Thank you, Madoka-chan," she murmurs.

Madoka gives her a small smile, before she turns to grab Homura's hand.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka points to the bruising marks on her neck, "...I know you shouldn't waste magic, but Mama will definitely notice that."

Homura places a hand to her throat—it feels a bit sore, and considering how much strength Kyouko had used earlier... Without another word, she follows Madoka to the bathroom.

When they disappear around the corner, Mami glances down to the bag in her hands. "Right—let me, put this away..." Her voice trails off as she turns to the entrance. "...After I clean that up. Kyouko, you should get ready as well." She gives her a look, before heading over to the kitchen in search of a broom.

As Mami's footsteps fade, Kyouko finds herself alone in the living room. She runs her hands through her hair, finally realizing her ponytail has come undone. "...What am I doing?"

She sighs, and shakes her head.

/

When Junko finally pulls her car into the driveway, all three girls in the backseat breathe a little easier. If Junko notices, she's tactful enough to ignore it as they all pile out of the car and head to the restaurant.

It's a small building located at the edge of downtown, the outside looking a bit dilapidated with wooden boards where one would usually find cemented walls.

Junko has an arm around Madoka as she leads them to the front: "don't mind the decor girls, what really counts is the food."

This comment earns her an approving nod from Kyouko, but when Junko catches her eye and gives her a smile, Kyouko quickly looks away, tucking her hands into her pocket as she pretends to act unfazed.

Next to her, Mami smiles into her hand; it reminds her of the old Kyouko, and her smile grows a bit nostalgic.

The door is pulled open, and Junko ushers the girls in with a sweep of her hand.

All four enter, filling up the small waiting area by the door. There are a few chairs pushed against the left wall, and an empty podium to their right, propped against a short counter. Homura takes her place by Madoka's side, and as Junko passes them on her way to the podium, her eyes briefly flicker down to their intertwined hands.

The smile never leaves her face as she rings the small bell on the counter. A moment later, an older woman dressed in an old-fashioned waitress uniform emerges through an opening in the far back. The clatter of dishware that follows after her alludes it to be the kitchen.

"Irrashaimase!" She bows in greeting.

Junko lightly bows in response, before she straightens up. "I have a reservation for five under Kaname Junko."

"Kaname-san, is it? Let me just check really quick..."

Junko nods, and they wait as the woman flips open a well worn binder placed on top of the podium.

"Kaname Junko-san..." her hand moves down the page, and a smile is across her face once she finds Junko's name. "Five, correct?" Her gaze passes over each girl in curiosity.

Junko nods in agreement.

"You are a bit too young to be their mothers," the woman comments as she retrieves five menus from the counter. Her eyes evaluate Junko's casual clothing, "you are... their teacher?"

Here, Junko laughs. "Well, one of them is my cute daughter," she says as she wraps an arm around Madoka's shoulder, and pulls her forward.

Madoka gives a shy smile, reluctantly letting go of Homura's hand as the attention focuses on her.

Junko nods to the other three. "And these are her friends from school."

"Ah," the woman looks between mother and daughter, "she is indeed very cute." She then gestures for them to start following her. As she walks, she smiles at Madoka, "you will grow up to be beautiful just like your mother."

Madoka ducks her head at the compliment. "Thank you."

Walking behind them, Homura stops in her tracks, and Kyouko barely manages to not run into her.

"Hey, watch it, Kitty Cat!"

The three leading the line turn around, two curious, and one worried when they hear Kyouko shout.

Madoka steps away from her mother to approach Homura. "Homura-chan?"

Feeling all eyes on her, Homura shakes her head, "...sorry," she mumbles softly.

Madoka glances at her, but knowing it is neither the time nor place, she merely reaches for Homura's hand to drag her along.

When they reach Junko, she looks at them curiously. "Everything okay?"

Madoka nods, "everything's fine, right, Homura-chan?"

"Y-Yes..."

Junko eyes them for a brief second. "...Alright, if you're sure." She turns back around, and they continue further inside.

They reach one of the tables in the back, and the head waitress stands to the side, waiting for them to be seated. Junko claims a seat by the wall, and just as Madoka moves to sit next to her, Kyouko pulls her back.

"Mami wants to sit there," is all she says before she shoves Mami forward.

Mami looks as confused as Madoka, but when Kyouko takes the seat next to her, she realizes that Kyouko is merely choosing the furthest spot away from Kaname Junko. Mami smiles as Kyouko scowls.

Madoka blinks at the arrangement, but with an encouraging nod from her mother, she slides into the booth seats on the other side as Homura takes the spot besides her. A menu is slipped in front of each, and then the head waitress bows, before she disappears to greet more guests that have arrived.

"I've been here a few times," Junko says, menu in her hands as she breaks the silence. "Any of their bentous are good..." she scans the opened page, "oh, we'll need to start with their tofu, and there's a few rolls we'll definitely have to get." She pulls the menu down so she can see all four of their faces, "I hope you girls don't mind helping me finish all this food?"

Nervous glances are exchanged.

Madoka gives her mother a smile, "it sounds good, Mama."

Junko points to a dish on the menu, "they also have really good sashimi here, Homura."

At the mention of fish, Homura sits up in her seat. Catching herself, she immediately sits back down. Embarrassed, she gives Junko a nervous glance, who merely gives her an encouraging smile, before turning to address Kyouko and Mami.

"Feel free to order whatever you'd like," she tells them. "Don't hold back at all."

Nose held to her menu, Kyouko peers past the paper, already knowing what she wants to eat. If it was anyone else paying, she would be rattling off her choices already, but Kaname Junko makes her nervous.

"Kyouko-chan?"

"Eh? Ah..."

Mami leans back in her seat as Junko leans forward in hers to look at Kyouko, "really, don't hold back. You seem pretty hungry."

Kyouko gives her a stiff nod. "S-Sure... er," another side glance, and when she sees the smile that Mami's doing a bad job of hiding, she glares at the empty seat in front of her. "Yeah... er, thanks," she mutters.

"Don't forget to leave some room for dessert too," Junko reminds them. "I know a place with some really good sundaes," she looks at Homura again, "and they're famous for their milkshakes."

In her seat, Homura unconsciously starts tapping her foot on the floor as she stares at her menu. She stops when she feels a hand on her leg. She blushes, realizing what she had been doing.

"Sorry," she whispers, quiet enough so that only Madoka can hear her.

Smiling, Madoka shakes her head lightly, "be patient, Homura-chan."

Homura quickly swallows the rumble in her throat. She nervously raises her eyes, and breathes out a sigh of relief when it seems like Junko has not noticed. Except—sharp purple eyes suddenly meet hers, and the amused smile across Junko's lips makes Homura think otherwise. She quickly brings her menu up higher to avoid that knowing gaze.

"Mama." Madoka frowns at her mother, knowing that she's deliberately teasing Homura.

Junko smiles wider, "hmm? What is it, Madoka? Would you like to share a bentou with me?"

Madoka huffs at her mother who is now grinning, "...that's fine."

"Mmhmm..." Junko taps her menu, "I'm about ready to order, how about you girls?"

When there are echoes of agreement, Junko raises her arm, and calls out to the waitress. "Excuse me!"

A moment later, the same woman that had seated them stands by their table, and after distributing five glasses of water, a pad and pen are produced from her apron. She starts with Kyouko, and moves in a clockwise fashion to take all of their orders.

Once finished, she smiles, and gathers all the menus into her hands. With a short bow, "I'll be out shortly with your other drinks," she tells them, and then she steps away, heading to the kitchen to put in their dishes.

With nothing left to distract them, Junko folds her hands on top of the table, and smiles to help clear the awkwardness. She turns to Mami, who sits up straighter when she feels Junko watching her.

"I just wanted to thank you two for being there for Homura and Madoka. From lending Madoka your uniform, to helping them look for Amy. Seeing them off right before their trip, and making them that bentou. For showing your concern."

Mami shyly looks away. "Ah... I would have done so for anyone else..."

Junko points to her, "see, and that's exactly what I'm referring to." She glances behind Mami, and her lips twitch in amusement when Kyouko tries to hide behind Mami.

"Friends are important," she nods to her daughter, "don't take them for granted, Madoka."

"I won't, Mama."

"Good. We'll have to invite Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan out soon too."

All four of them freeze, but Junko is distracted as she takes a sip of her water.

Madoka swallows heavily, and unable to answer, she reaches for her cup. She takes a drink, and everyone else keeps quiet as Junko waits for Madoka to finish.

"Madoka?"

She glances up, meeting her mother's eyes. "Yes, Mama?"

"Have you... spoken to Sayaka-chan recently?"

Madoka feels the words catch in her throat. Underneath the table, Homura places a reassuring hand on Madoka's knee.

"She..." Madoka drops her gaze to the table, "sent me a text, when we were in Tokyo. We're..." she sighs softly, "not really speaking at the moment..." She lifts her head, this time furrowing her brow to show off her concern, "is... there something wrong?"

"Mm..." Junko holds her cup in her hand, and traces the drops of condensation that run along the surface of the glass. She takes another sip, before, "it's nothing you have to be concerned about. Hopefully just a bit of a misunderstanding."

"Mama?"

Junko smiles, and when she places her cup down, there's a sudden change in the air. "So, tell me how you all met? Mami-chan is a third-year, correct?"

Here, Mami has no trouble schooling her face, "yes. Madoka-chan and I met after school actually. She was in a bit of trouble..."

"Oh?" Junko glances to her daughter who nods in agreement.

"I met—Mami-chan around the same time Homura-chan transferred in," Madoka interjects, absently playing with Homura's hand under the table as she thinks of an excuse. "Mami-chan—helped me find my school ID," she says this sheepishly, "we were looking everywhere for it, and Mami-chan offered to help search..."

Mami smiles, "and it ended up being in your school bag all along, right, Madoka-chan?"

Madoka winces; that had actually happened before. "Sorry about that, Mami-chan."

"Maa, it brought us closer, so it's not like I minded."

Junko nods to Mami, "thank you for looking out for my daughter. She's a bit air-headed; she takes after her father."

Madoka pouts, "Mama!"

Junko laughs, and her humour is infectious: Mami feels herself smiling in return.

Homura squeezes Madoka's hand, trying to comfort her, and Madoka falls back against her seat, huffing in fake indignation.

Off to the side, Kyouko finishes the rest of her water and is staring aimlessly at the remaining ice cubes when a sharp elbow is suddenly digging into her ribs.

She glares at Mami, but when the blonde nods to Junko, she realizes she had been asked a question.

"Er..."

Junko smiles, "how is your transfer going along, Kyouko-chan? I'm sure you're eager to start school with everyone else."

Kyouko shrugs. "S'okay." She tries to ignore the heavy feeling when she realizes she'll never be able to experience a school day with Sayaka.

Junko sighs wistfully, "ahh, to be young again. Don't forget to experience your school days to your fullest," she nods sagely, and as she holds her cup in front of her, Madoka is suddenly reminded of her Mama during those late nights when she's at home, relaxing with a cup of alcohol. "It'll all be over in a flash, and then you'll be working in an office with a bald head from HR always butting into your business because he's still old-fashioned and believes that women have no right to rise to a position higher than 'office lady.'"

"Mama?"

Junko knocks back the rest of her water. She looks disappointed as she frowns at her cup. "That, certainly lacks a bit of an impact."

"I apologize for the wait, here are your drinks," the headwaitress interrupts as she approaches the table with a large tray in hand.

Junko brightens immediately, "just in time!"

The older woman starts handing off their refreshments, followed by the plates of appetizers that Junko had ordered.

When everything is placed on the table, she bows, and with parting words telling them to take their time eating, she heads over to another table.

Junko waits until everyone has chopsticks in their hands, "don't hold back, girls, you're all at the age where you're growing." Her gaze quickly darts to Madoka, "well, some more than others."

Madoka responds by sticking out her tongue.

Four declarations of 'itadakimasu' are echoed, before everyone starts digging in.

As Junko takes a sip of her cold beer, she smiles at how much more relaxed the girls now are; how bright their young faces are as they enjoy their meal.

The small knot in her stomach eases a bit when she sees Madoka sitting next to Homura, both of them safe and sound.

She takes a longer drink this time, wondering how she will be able to break the news to her daughter. She pushes those thoughts back, and easily forms a grin on her face.

Her beer is exchanged with her chopsticks, and with a quick 'itadakimasu', she proceeds to join in. She seizes a large piece of karaage, and then deposits it onto Madoka's plate, before doing the same for Homura. "Here, eat up you two; if you move any slower, Kyouko-chan's going to eat everything."

"S'nowi'mwot."

Mami gives her a disapproving look, "Kyouko."

"Thanks, Mama."

"...Thank you," Homura mumbles quietly.

Junko nods. "Of course. Anytime."

Madoka looks up, and though she knows her mother only had a little bit to drink, her eyes seem a bit glossy. "Mama?"

"Hm, Madoka?"

Madoka blinks, but Junko suddenly points to her plate.

"...I was joking earlier, but it really looks like Kyouko-chan might eat everything."

Madoka turns as a bit of tofu is placed on her plate by a frowning Homura.

"Sorry Madoka, this was all I could get..." Homura looks about ready to hiss at Kyouko.

"Thank you, Homura-chan. We can share?" She splits the piece in half, and then holds it up. "Here you go, Homura-chan."

Homura gives her a blank stare. "...Madoka?"

"Kyouko, I was eating that!"

"You snooze you lose, Blondie."

"Say 'ah,' Homura-chan."

Junko takes a bite of her karaage; it's sweet, salty, and pairs nicely with the bitterness of her beer.

/

Just as promised, Junko treats the girls to dessert after their meal.

Kyouko and Homura are the only two that finish theirs, though Homura just barely manages to keep it all down.

As they all struggle back to the car, an invitation is extended to Mami and Kyouko as Junko invites them to join them at the park. With a bit of stuttering and a handful excuses, they convince her that they need to go home. She insists on dropping them off however, and before they part ways, manages to squeeze out a promise of another meal sometime soon.

In the wake of Kaname Junko, Madoka gives them an apologetic smile and wave as she follows her mother and Homura to the car.

Once their selt belts are clicked in, they start the short drive to their next destination.

As they reach the main road, Junko finally breaks the silence. "Papa and Takkun should be done soon," she tells Madoka as she glances at the rearview mirror: Homura is now dozing on Madoka's shoulder, no doubt in a food coma after polishing off all that sashimi, and then that large milkshake. "After that dessert..." Junko pats her stomach absently, "want to take a walk while we wait for them to show up?"

Madoka blinks sleepily; Homura's not the only one suffering from their large meal. "Sure, I don't mind, Mama. It's—not a good idea to sleep right after eating anyways..." She looks over to Homura, but doesn't have the heart to wake her up.

"We can take that path up the large hill," Junko says, flicking the signal to switch lanes. "The distance isn't as far, but it's uphill, so it'll burn more calories." She gives Homura another glance, "...though, maybe we should take something a bit easier. It's probably not good for her to move around that much just yet... I'm not even sure if I'll be able to make it up there..."

Madoka pokes Homura's face, earning her a frown from the napping girl. "She had a bunch of milk earlier too..."

Junko casts a wistful look in their direction. "I'm going to need to exercise extra this week, or else that meal will definitely come back to haunt me." Junko pauses, giving Madoka a quick glance, "you should be careful too, Madoka, you take after me; you're young now, but eventually you'll gain weight really quickly if you keep eating all those sweets."

"I know," Madoka huffs. She remembers her lie: "that's why we've been exercising afterschool..." Catching her mother's reflection in the rearview mirror, she pouts when she looks her way, "why couldn't you have a fast metabolism, Mama?"

Junko turns the car, and without skipping a beat, "because then Mama would be too perfect; I had to have a flaw somewhere, Madoka."

"...That doesn't mean you have to pass your flaws to your children though."

The park is a few streets away, and Junko eases the car into the far left lane. "You have your Papa to blame for that, Madoka." There's traffic ahead, and the car slows to a stop. As they wait for the light to turn green, Junko half turns in her seat to look at Madoka, "other than a slow metabolism, Mama's perfect. All your other flaws are from Papa."

There's a pause, before they both start laughing, and immediately regret it when their stomachs protest from the sudden movement.

Traffic starts moving again, and Junko concentrates back on the road.

Despite still being uncomfortably full, Madoka smiles to herself; she had missed being home.

When the car is parked, and the engine is off, Madoka carefully tries to wake Homura up without triggering her ears and tail. To her relief, she's successful, and manages to drag a sleepy Homura out of the car.

Afraid she will expose her magic while half asleep, Madoka quickly reminds her that Junko is watching. The name works as intended, and Homura is more awake as they wait for Junko to exit the car.

She's moving slowly, and halfway out, she suddenly sits back down. From her seat, she waves them over.

Madoka blinks, and approaches the car, "is something wrong, Mama?"

"...Go first, Madoka. Mama has to ease into this..." Her face is suddenly pained as she tries to straighten her back, "maybe we went a bit overboard with dessert... Is this old age? Am I getting old...?"

"Are you sure, Mama...? Do you want us to buy some medicine?"

Junko throws an arm over her eyes, but the dramatic flair is dampened as she remains slouched over. "Leave me, Madoka, save yourself. Mama's... not going to make it..."

Madoka is this close to rolling her eyes, but she figures her mother has to be okay if she can still joke around.

She starts to pull Homura away. "You heard her, Homura-chan. Let's leave before she embarrases us further."

Junko tries to respond with another dramatic flourish, but stops when she feels she might just actually throw up. She weakly makes a shooing gesture.

"Don't fall too behind, Mama," Madoka tells her, before they start walking.

After a few minutes, Junko tentatively straightens up. She's relieved to find it's not as painful as before. She squints towards the road, and sees Madoka and Homura up ahead. They haven't gotten very far, and she realizes that they're most likely waiting for her. It's confirmed when she sees Madoka glance back. She carefully exits the car, and after locking the doors, she takes a deep breath, before she starts moving.

She's slowly catching up, but before she can reach them, she waves her arm in their direction. She then points forward.

"...is she saying something? I can't hear anything," Homura murmurs as she watches Junko point again.

Madoka tilts her head. "...I think she wants us to go first." She points to the road behind her, and when Junko responds with a nod and an 'OK' signal, Madoka tugs Homura along.

They continue their leisurely stroll, their progress hindered as Madoka makes an occasional glance behind her to check on her mother. The next time she does this however, she sees Junko with her hands on her hips.

Both girls stop when she opens her mouth.

"Hurry up and walk already, Madoka! If Mama catches up to you, you don't want to know what happens!"

There's a beat as Madoka tries to determine if her mother is serious.

"M-Madoka...?"

Madoka turns, and seeing how nervous Homura looks, she decides she's probably very serious. She grabs Homura's hand, and they walk a bit faster to put more distance between them and Kaname Junko.

As their figures finally get smaller, Junko sighs in exasperation. "Madoka... you definitely take after your Papa." She shakes her head as an amused smile crosses her lips.

She waits for another few minutes, before she continues at her slower pace.

Up ahead, their sense of urgency sends them further into the park. It isn't until they reach the crest of a smaller hill, that Madoka feels that they're no longer in danger. After confirming Junko's position, they slow down, and take the opportunity to catch their breath.

Still holding Homura's hand, Madoka glances over in her direction. She smiles, but soon starts laughing when she sees how serious Homura looks.

Homura turns to her, confused, and Madoka merely bumps Homura's leg with her hip, before pushing against Homura's side.

"Y-You should've seen your face, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, still laughing. She grins, slipping an arm around Homura's waist, "don't worry, Homura-chan, I'll protect you against big, bad, Junko."

Homura looks away, face flushing in embarrassement. She frowns, "I wasn't scared..."

When Madoka sees that Homura is all but pouting, she gives her a brief hug, "I'm sorry, you just looked really cute, so I couldn't help but tease you. Forgive me?"

This time, Homura tries to hide her face, "I wasn't mad..." she mumbles softly.

"Mmhmmm."

Despite her earlier statement, Homura glances behind them once more. She does a quick estimation in her head; they could easily outrun Junko from this distance. She finally relaxes ever so slightly.

As their breathing returns to normal, and the threat of Junko is no longer literally behind them, Madoka takes a moment to look around. Clear skies, and greenery that stretches as far as their eyes can see. The smell of grass tickles her nose. She looks down, confirming her fingers curled around Homura's.

Her hand is warm.

She gently squeezes Homura's hand. The other girl looks over in response, but slowly straightens up when she sees Madoka's expression.

"Walk with me?" Madoka asks her, voice soft.

There's something behind those words, and Homura hesitates, still unsure of her feelings. But when Madoka looks at her again, she nods. The smile Madoka gives her makes her heart skip a beat, in a good way.

With their hands linked together, they continue walking, but this time they are much more relaxed. After another moment, Madoka finally speaks.

"...I'm sorry for cutting our trip short."

Homura looks over in surprise.

"I know you were looking forward to going to the fish market," Madoka murmurs, remembering how excited Homura had been.

Homura blinks, "...It's fine. It's just fish."

Madoka gives her a sad smile, "we... didn't get a chance to go on our date, either."

At this, Homura falls silent. She stares at their held hands, unconsciously slowing her footsteps. She shakes her head, "that's—okay," she says as she resumes their earlier pace.

Madoka scans Homura's face—she's sure there was a hint of disappointment at the reminder. She licks her lips, and presses forward, "...we can go somewhere here, in Mitakihara."

Homura glances over, and they both slow to a halt to face each other.

"There's plenty to do here, too," Madoka tells her; Homura isn't saying no. "Movies... the aquarium... game center. We—" she stares into Homura's eyes, "can go to one of those instead."

Homura knows she should refuse. After all, a date, in the midst of when Madoka should be mourning, is the last thing they should be doing. Her mouth opens, but snaps shut when she sees how hopeful Madoka looks.

"We..." her resolve falters, "...could."

Madoka's beaming smile drives away that shred of doubt.

Madoka suddenly takes a step forward, and throws her arms around Homura, pulling her in close for a hug.

"I'll think of something," she whispers into her ear.

A tense pause, until Homura hesitantly returns the hug. "...Okay," she answers back.

Madoka holds her for a little longer, before reluctantly moving away. Still smiling, she grabs Homura's hand to continue their walk. The air feels lighter, and more relaxed, Madoka starts listing things they can do, while Homura occasionally chimes in.

They're passing an empty playground, and feeling nostalgic, Madoka veers off the path to enter, pulling Homura in with her.

"I haven't played on one of these in years," Madoka murmurs as she heads towards the monkey bars.

When she's close enough, she drops Homura's hand, and tries to reach for the bars. "Oof..." she stretches her arms, standing on her tiptoes. "Wait... Shouldn't this be lower...?"

Homura covers her mouth with her hand, turning her head away to hide her smile.

"Ahh! I saw that, Homura-chan!"

She blinks, turning back around, only to find Madoka now in front of. Her hand is grabbed, and she's dragged over to the metal structure. To Madoka's disappointment, since Homura is taller, she's able to reach the rungs just by standing on her tiptoes. When Madoka pouts, Homura deliberately moves from one end of the bars to the other, all while keeping her feet on the ground.

"I know these are taller than the regular ones," Madoka tells her, still pouting. "They're definitely for bigger kids, don't you think so, Homura-chan?"

Homura moves a step back to take a closer look. After a moment, she drops her act. With a shake of her head, "...I'm sorry. I'm not really familiar with how big these should be..." Her voice trails off when she notices Madoka's face fall. Panicking, she reaches into her jacket pocket, hand wrapping around her phone, "I can look it up—" Just as she's about to pull her phone out, Madoka's hand cover hers.

"Homura-chan..."

Her brows furrow in slight confusion.

With a sigh, Madoka shakes her head. "It's okay. Let's go wash our hands."

She slowly removes her hands from her pocket. "...Okay."

They head over to the small water fountain nearby, and the water is cold as they take turns rinsing off their hands. Homura is absently wiping her hands dry when droplets of water hits her face. She blinks rapidly, and turns around to find Madoka smiling.

"It was an accident, Homura-chan," she tells her innocently as she pulls out her handkerchief from her pocket. Still smiling, she proceeds to make a show of drying her hands.

Homura blinks again. After a moment, she brings her cloth close to pat the water away.

Madoka looks up, the smile never leaving her face. "Are you almost done, Homura-chan?"

She's thinking about it, and her eyes glance to the water fountain, now glistening in the sunlight.

"Homura-chan?"

The temptation is stronger now—

"Are you feeling okay?" Worried, Madoka takes a step forward.

Homura suddenly reaches over to compress the small switch, and a small arc of water flows out from the spout.

Wary, Madoka steps back, and watches as Homura brushes her hair behind her ear, before taking a long drink.

She stops once she's full, and straightens up as she licks the water from her lips. When she catches Madoka standing off to the side, she tilts her head. "What's wrong?"

Madoka shakes her head, and walks closer. "Nothing." She gives her a sheepish smile, "I just thought you were going to get me back."

Homura blinks.

"Sorry," Madoka looks apologetic. "I know you wouldn't."

"Mm," Homura presses the switch again, this time to lightly coat her fingers with water.

Before Madoka can react, Homura flicks water in her direction.

"...you mean, like this?"

Madoka blinks a few times, still trying to grasp in her head that Homura had just done that.

She lifts her arm, and wipes the droplets from her face.

A pause, before Homura murmurs, "it was an accident."

When Madoka doesn't respond, Homura continues, "plus, we're even now."

Madoka hums. She glances down to the water fountain, and Homura does the same.

They both move in unison, but Madoka reaches the switch first. As water flows, she tries to block the fountain with her body, and at the same time attempts to gather enough water to tag Homura with.

Homura manages to reach over her, filling her hands with water before Madoka can push her away.

Just as Madoka turns, water hits her face, and she sputters as some goes up her nose.

Water drips from her hands, and she stands there, using her sleeve to wipe the water from her eyes.

No longer sensing danger, Homura nervously waits nearby; maybe she had gone overboard. She takes a small step forward, "Madoka...?"

"Homura-chan..." Her voice is low, and Homura draws back.

"I-I'm sorry," she apologizes quickly. "Let me help you dry," she offers, holding out her handkerchief in appeasement.

She gulps when Madoka smiles.

It isn't long until Junko appears from the small path. She stops, and watches as a small game of cat and mouse takes place in the playground, though the longer she stares, the more she wonders just who the cat is, and who is the mouse.

Finally, Homura grabs Madoka by the waist, holding her as they catch their breath.

"We should stop," Homura tells her, voice soft. A light breeze hits, and they both feel a chill from the wet spots on their clothing.

Madoka looks into Homura's eyes. She smiles—a genuine, not scary smile, and Homura feels herself smiling back.

"Okay," Madoka says as she relaxes her body. "We don't have a change of clothes anyways, and we still have to wait until Papa and Takkun get here until we can leave."

Homura nods, and pulls her hands away. She reaches behind her, gathering her hair into a small ponytail to wring out the water. Once done, she gently combs her fingers through the strands to straighten out the tangles.

Madoka shakes her head, and sighs when she feels one side is heavier than the other; Homura had gotten her good that one time.

She holds her hair in one hand, and uses her handkerchief to dry it. When Homura looks over, she turns away again when she sees how poofy Madoka's hair has gotten.

Madoka steps closer, putting her hands on Homura's waist, knowing she was particular ticklish there, "I know you were laughing at my hair, Homura-chan."

Homura tries to bat her hands away, and successfully captures them by intertwining their fingers together. She holds Madoka's hands up as Madoka leans forward, trying to break free. "It's—" she looks at how one side sits flatter than the other, "...cute."

With a sigh, Madoka stops struggling. She drops her head, feeling her cheeks colour. "...Thats not fair, Homura-chan."

"Let me help," Homura murmurs. She lets go of their hands, instead reaching for her handkerchief that had somehow made it unscathed through their water fight.

Madoka patiently stands as Homura gently towels her hair dry the best she can with the small cloth.

"...I think that's good enough," Homura says as she eyes her work. Madoka's hair looks a bit more even, though a few more strands stand up unevenly from the static.

Madoka smiles, and reaches for Homura's hand. "Thank you, Homura-chan. Want to continue walking?"

"...Okay." She carefully folds her handkerchief, before she slips it into her pocket.

With one last glance to the small playground, they step back onto the path.

When Junko sees that they have started moving again, she starts to follow.

The day is winding down, and she knows she has put it off long enough. Her expression grows sad when she knows that Madoka's carefree world is about to come crashing down.

She widens her stride, and easily catches up. She extends her arms, and just before contact, Homura turns, acknowledging Junko with a nervous glance. Junko grins, and then throws her arms around their smaller shoulders, catching Madoka off-guard.

"Hey you two, how 'bout letting Mama join in, hmm?"

Madoka recovers quickly, and nods in response, "sure, Mama." She drops Homura's hand, and sneaks a glance; she's relieved to find her cat ears are still hidden.

They make room to allow Junko to squeeze in between them.

"Are you feeling better?" Madoka asks her.

"Mmhmm. Lots."

She gives Madoka a smile, and for a few more minutes, they continue walking in comfortable silence. The whole time, Junko keeps her arms around their shoulders.

They're reaching the end of the small path, and as they climb to the top of the hill, Madoka finally notices their shadows are much longer, stretching far enough to cover the ground underneath their feet. A glance around for confirmation; it's close to sunset.

When the incline slowly evens out, they take a moment to enjoy the view of the lake in the distance. Sunlight hits the water, and in the background, the sounds of laughing children carry in the wind.

The grin slowly fades from Junko's face, and when she pulls her arms away, Madoka and Homura both turn to look at her.

Madoka feels something wash over her when she sees her mother's serious expression.

"...Mama?"

"Madoka."

She straightens her back. "...Is something wrong, Mama?"

Junko imagines how it would be, if Madoka suddenly disappeared. She reaches forward, and gathers her daughter in her arms.

"Mama...?"

Madoka is still small for her age, but Junko remembers her being much, much smaller.

"Madoka..." She holds her a bit longer, before she finally pulls away. "I'm about to tell you something, okay?"

Madoka licks her lips nervously, but her mother is still watching, waiting. She nods. "...Okay, Mama."

Junko acknowledges the quiet Homura with a glance; she's a good girl, standing back because she knows that this is important. Junko turns to Madoka, and smiles sadly. She gently brushes back Madoka's messy bangs, still damp from their impromptu water fight. She sighs, "...Madoka, Sayaka-chan's missing."

Madoka pauses, before she tilts her head, feigning confusion, "w-what do you mean—missing?" Her voice is shaky, and Junko places her hands on Madoka's shoulders.

"She's—her mother thinks that she may have run away."

"...What do you mean, Mama?"

"You said Sayaka-chan messaged you when you were in Tokyo?"

Madoka nods slowly, "she—did."

"Did she say anything? About maybe her going somewhere? Or that, she was going to visit someone, or anything at all?"

Madoka shakes her head. "N-No. Sayaka-chan—didn't say anything at all—we're—we were fighting, and she wanted to see how I was doing... but—" her voice cuts off, because that's really what happened, and her mother's hand is gentle as they brush away her tears. "She—ran away...?"

"She's been gone since yesterday."

She chokes back a sob at the reminder. "Why—didn't you say anything...?"

Junko hugs Madoka again, "because you were in Tokyo—"

"I would've come back! I wanted to come back!"

"I know."

Madoka buries her face in her mother's chest, and her tears are real because she knows that Sayaka will never be found.

"We were fighting," she mumbles. "She didn't say anything. She never talked to me..."

"Shh, it's okay, honey. Sayaka-chan will be okay. She's probably just clearing her head somewhere. She's a smart girl; she'll be back. She knows there's lots of people here who care about her."

Junko's words cut deep into both girls. Madoka wraps her arms around her mother, feeling that lump once again stuck in the back of her throat.

Homura turns away. She presses a hand to her leg, fingers curling in, and hard enough to bruise; why was she so usel—

A familiar scent of perfume; a familiar warmth—

Junko sweeps Homura into her embrace, and hugs both girls tightly. "Promise me that you girls will come talk to me if something's wrong. It doesn't matter when—what it's about, I will always, always make the time to listen. *Always*."

Madoka sniffles, and with a small, wavering voice, "...I promise, Mama."

Junko kisses Madoka on the forehead, and then does the same to Homura. "Homura?"

Homura squeezes her eyes shut. There's a firm hand on her back, and after a long pause, she can only give a weak nod, but it's enough that Junko finally lets go.

"Good." Junko pulls away, and she smiles, gazing at Madoka, and then to Homura. "Alright, that's enough waterworks for today. If Papa and Takkun sees us like this, they'll think something has happened—and nothing has yet."

Madoka opens her mouth, but Junko shakes her head.

"Nothing has happened yet," she repeats, voice firm. Her hand moves under Madoka's chin, and she tilts her face up, "look up, okay, Madoka? We can't give up yet; Sayaka-chan can still come home—will come home. And we'll be there for her when she does."

Not trusting her voice, Madoka nods, before she brings up her sleeve to wipe her face.

"We'll get through this," Junko tells them.

Madoka wants to trust her; wants to pretend that everything her mother says will come true, that Sayaka, and even Hitomi will come home, safe and sound.

She knows better now though, but she's also better at pretending to be okay.

"...Thank you, Mama."

/

Her gaze is absent as she stares into the orange and pink brushed sky; a view that's starting to feel a little bit like home.

She leans heavily on the railings, body heavy, and not because of the large meal, and sickening sweet dessert they just had. A gust of wind passes through, and she closes her eyes, enjoying the chill as it soothes her slightly fevered skin.

"Kyouko, are you okay?"

She exhales slowly, before she glances over her shoulder. Mami hovers nearby, full senpai mode activated.

Kyouko props her head up, hand underneath her chin. "...She's something else, isn't she?" she says after another moment.

Mami pauses, digesting her words, before she realizes who she is referring to. She acknowledges the change of subject with a sigh, but lets it go for now. "She..." her lips twitch into a small smile, "...that's putting it lightly." There's a bit of awe in her voice that Kyouko catches, but she can understand that feeling.

Kaname Junko is definitely something else.

Kyouko narrows her eyes. "She's—nothing like how my mom was."

The slight shock from Mami's face quickly disappears, warping into one more fragile and introspective. A tentative inhale, "she is... kind in her own way. Strong." She pauses, mouth dry at the sudden breach of topic, "...Madoka-chan is lucky to have a mother like her."

Kyouko tilts her head back, glancing briefly to Mami, before once again facing the setting sun. "Man, something like that... something like that would normally tick me off. Why can't... why..."

Mami closes her eyes, "'...why can't I have something like that?'"

Kyouko abruptly turns to her. After a few seconds, she shows off her fangs, smiling humourlessly. "Yeah."

She angles her face upwards.

"...But that's how it is usually, isn't it? The hero, with the tragic backstory." She shakes her head, "... we're definitely the main characters. Against all odds..." she leans her head down, touching her forehead against the cool metal surface of the railing. "...Is that how it'll end...?"

Mami steps closer. "Hey, Kyouko?"

She grunts in response.

"...You're not alone, you know that, don't you?"

Kyouko lifts her head to stare at the waning sunlight. The pause is long enough that Mami's sure she's not going to answer.

But—

"Yeah," she agrees, voice low. "I know."

Mami bows her head, "we're not alone, so..." she places her hand on the railing, close enough to Kyouko's, "don't think... that you can just leave without me. Not again."

Kyouko closes her eyes. "...Yeah, I know."

The conversation lulls as the sun continues to disappear behind the high rise buildings of the city.

Leaning against the railing, Kyouko opens her eyes, "maybe..."

She remains staring straight ahead, and Mami is only able to see a part of her profile.

She scratches her cheek absently, "maybe, if this—maybe after everything blows over—maybe, I wouldn't mind, maybe transferring to school."

Hearing this, Mami is at a loss for words. "Kyouko..."

"A normal life, huh?" Kyouko extends a hand, and the sun is small enough that she is able to cover it with one finger. "Only until the sun sets." She pushes off the railing, and turns to Mami. "We should get ready to head out."

Mami frowns in response. "Maybe you should rest. I'll patrol tonight."

Kyouko rotates her shoulder, listening as joints pop and crackle. She turns her neck, and there's a satisfying crack heard in her ears.

"Kyouko?"

"Nah." She looks at Mami, "I'll be fine."

"Kyouko—"

"It's all I know," Kyouko tells her as she stares straight ahead. She places a hand on her stomach, "this is full, but—" she moves her hand to her chest, fingers pressing against her shirt, "this isn't. It's—the only way I know how to cope. So—" her voice cracks, and she turns to look at Mami.

After a moment, Mami nods. "Alright... but be careful, okay? If you need help—tell me."

"...Yeah."

When Mami doesn't say anything else, Kyouko heads over to the glass door. She slides it open, but instead of immediately entering, she takes a moment to stare into the living room.

Today, is like any other day.

There are still leftovers from Mami's baking session in the kitchen; the refrigerator is still full of groceries.

There's a gaping hole in her heart, but somehow, everything else is still the same.

"Kyouko?"

She takes a deep breath, and after a long sigh, she steps inside.

/

Night falls, and after a light dinner with her family, followed by a much needed bath, Madoka and Homura retire to their shared room.

Hair still damp, and bodies warm in their pajamas, Madoka smiles as she sees Amy draped over the blankets. She's suddenly reminded of this afternoon, but sighs as she is unable to stay mad at both of them. She approaches her bed, and when she's close enough, she picks Amy up, cradling her in her arms as she takes a seat. Amy's one eye lazily cracks open, and she acknowledges Madoka with a lick, before her eye once again closes.

Madoka absently pets Amy, smiling when she starts purring. She raises her head, automatically searching for Homura, and finds her standing near the closed door.

Even after all this time, and after all they've been through, she's still so unsure.

Madoka's eyes soften. "Homura-chan?"

A shy glance is given in response, and Madoka pats the spot next to her.

Homura tenses, and her hands are suddenly entangled together. Her eyes nervously dart back and forth, before she slowly pads over, head slightly bowed.

Madoka shifts her body, facing Homura once she takes a tentative seat on the bed.

She doesn't say a word, hands clasped in her lap as she waits for Madoka to speak first.

Madoka runs her fingers over Amy's ears, comparing the sensation of a real cat, to Homura's magical ones: they are both soft in their own way.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura freezes, and with her head bowed, she glances over behind her bangs, "yes, Madoka?"

"Can I ask you something?"

She only realizes that she has taken too long to answer when Madoka places a hand on her knee, waking her from her thoughts. She licks her lips nervously, and after another long pause, she nods.

Madoka scoots her body closer, until she's side by side with Homura. "Can... I ask you what my original wish was? It wasn't something silly, was it? Like... wishing for a cake...?"

Homura takes a second to collect herself. She breathes in deeply, and after a slow exhale, she reaches to scratch underneath Amy's chin. There's a gentle smile on her face—a smile she only reserves for Amy, and occasionally, for Madoka.

"You... saved her," Homura tells her, voice soft. "Your wish was to save Amy after she was injured in a traffic accident."

Madoka breathes a small sigh of relief. "That's—good." She quickly corrects herself, "I mean, not that Amy was injured, but that my wish wasn't something so silly..."

Homura's gaze is absent as she's still lost in her memories. "And then... you saved me." She remembers Madoka's backside, ready to face Walpurgisnacht all by herself.

A hand touches her cheek, and the vision is gone. Her eyes focus, and Madoka's earnest face stares back.

"Homura-chan?"

They lock eyes.

"...Yes, Madoka?"

Madoka withdraws her hand, and leans over to rest her head against Homura's. "Have you... thought about what I told you?"

Homura immediately pulls back. She hadn't been expecting to confront this again so soon.

"I—" Madoka hesitates, but she knows it's now, or it really will be never— "...I love you, Homura-chan. I—can I know, what I mean to you?"

Homura swallows hard, feeling her face heat up at the confession. A hand is placed on hers, intertwining their fingers together.

Her mind screams at her to run away, but her body refuses to move. She opens her mouth as a lie starts to form on her lips "I—"

"Do you hate me?" Madoka asks her softly.

She quickly shakes her head. "N-No! I—could never hate you."

"Then...?"

Homura hunches over, pulling her hands away, bunching them into fists. "...W-What do you want me to say...?" she whispers. "I... already told you, how I felt..."

"Please, don't look like that, Homura-chan."

She closes her eyes as Madoka takes her hands once more. It's quiet as she gently tries to coax Homura into relaxing her tightened grip.

"I-I love you, Homura-chan," Madoka repeats as Homura's fingers slowly unfurl, revealing a line of red impressions on her palms. She holds Homura's hands, rubbing her thumbs over the markings to ease her pain. Her actions has Homura opening her eyes, and Madoka is waiting for her with a smile. "...The shy, gentle, crybaby Homura-chan—" she brushes a stray tear from Homura's face, "the milk loving, rat chasing Homura-chan," her lips raise in slight amusement, before her expression softens again, "the strong, and willing to help her friends at all costs Homura-chan. All of you—I love everything that makes you, you, Homura-chan."

She pauses, letting her words sink in.

"But, what am I to you? I—want to know what I mean to you, Homura-chan. If—" she breathes in slowly, "if... you can truthfuly tell me—I mean nothing to you... I'll—" she forces the words out, "I'll stop."

"I—" Homura knows this is for the best, knows that this is the only way it should be.

She *knows* this, but—

"I—you're—" She makes the mistake of looking at Madoka, and everything that she's been holding in, suddenly spills out, "...you—were my first friend. My—only friend. You're—" she cuts herself off, swiping the tears away, "when you told me that you had to—had to go, I wanted—to stop you, but I couldn't..." She shuts her eyes, face dampened by her tears. "You're strong, and kind, and amazing; of course..."

Madoka holds her breath, waiting.

Homura opens her eyes again, vision now blurred. She blinks, and their held hands briefly come into focus. She turns her head, looking away, "...of course... Iloveyou," she mumbles softly.

Madoka smiles, her own eyes filling with tears. "...Are you sure, Homura-chan?"

Homura feels her heart drop; did Madoka not believe her—is this another one of her punishments for lying for so long?

She turns back to Madoka, hands shaking, unable to keep the hurt off her face, "w-what—do you mean...?"

"I'm... not the same Madoka you know," Madoka tells her. She takes a deep breath, "I'm not a magical girl... I've—never really fought against a Witch. I—" she stares into Homura's eyes, "...didn't save you, Homura-chan. That Madoka... wasn't me. I'm just—plain Kaname Madoka. I'm short, and my grades aren't too good; I don't have any real talents, and I'm really bad at making decisions. Do you—really see me as Kaname Madoka? Or—do you see... someone else there, instead of me?"

The pleading tone fills her ears. She takes in a shallow breath as she repeats the question in her mind—

Could she in full conscience say that she isn't still chasing after a dream?

"Homura-chan...?"

The voice shakes her from her thoughts; she's taking much too long to answer.

She swallows hard, and once again turns her attention to the present. She can admit that even during waking moments, sometimes her memories distort, and she feels like she's still living in the past.

But—

She has made a lot of new, and good memories this time around.

She slowly places her hand over Madoka's, and unknown to her, that rare, gentle smile is once again across her face.

"I see..." she thinks back to one of her first, real encounters with this Madoka, "a kind, trusting girl, who offered to share her lunch with a complete stranger; who..." she looks around the room, pausing at the dresser that's filled with her own clothes, "...gave me a home—and a place to belong. I see someone who's willing to sacrifice herself," she strokes Amy's head, "to save an animal's life..."

She hasn't realized it yet, but she's starting to cry again.

"...Every time I come back, and I see you—" she pauses, sniffing lightly, and uses her sleeve to dab at her eyes, "...you remind me of who I lost..." She looks up, meeting Madoka's eyes, "but—then when I watch you, and see you living your life—you're..." her resolves wavers, gaze unsteady as she looks away, "...how—could I not fall in love with you all over again...?" she whispers. Embarrased, she squeezes her eyes shut, unable to bring herself to see Madoka's reaction.

When there's no answer, and just as she's about to awkwardly make an excuse to leave the room, there's a touch on her hand.

She cracks one eye open, watching as Madoka threads their hands together.

"Homura-chan...?"

Both eyes open, and Homura nervously glances up, unsure of Madoka's response. Her breath leaves her when she finds Madoka staring at her intensely.

She somehow finds her voice. "H-Hm...?"

Madoka slowly leans forward. "Can... I kiss you...?"

They lock eyes, and Homura feels her mouth go dry.

Madoka tentatively leans closer, giving Homura enough time to move away if she wanted to.

"Homura-chan...?"

It's on the tip of her tongue, and Madoka is close—

A gulp of air—

They both jump as the door echoes with a hollow knock. The sound wakes the napping Amy, and she shakes her head in response, bristling at the sound. She meows once, and after a quick stretch, heads over to her own bed.

"Madoka? Are you still awake?" Junko's voice calls to them through the door.

Homura clutches a hand to her chest, heart thumping loudly as she tries to control her heartbeat. She glances to Madoka, and at least feels a bit of relief when there's a splash of pink across her cheeks.

"Y-Yes, Mama, I'm—we're still awake." Madoka quickly gestures to Homura, pointing to the top of her head at the ears that have popped up from the interruption.

Homura quickly makes them disappear as Madoka tries to recompose herself.

"I'm coming in." The door knob twists, and with a small creak, followed by a light gust of wind, the door opens.

Madoka nervously brushes down her shirt, hoping her face won't give anything. She turns to greet her mother. Her sheepishness at almost getting caught slowly disappears when she sees the grim, thin line of her mother's lips; there's none of her usual playfulness.

Something else was wrong.

The reminder of Sayaka's absence gnaws at her stomach, and that guilt she had almost pushed away comes back round.

She braces herself, "is... something wrong, Mama?"

Junko approaches the bed, still remaining silent. Her eyes are hard, but when her gaze falls back to Madoka, that steel is gone, replaced by a weariness that Madoka knows all too well.

"...Mama?"

Without saying anything, Junko steps forward. Her arms extend, and she's cupping Madoka's face with her hands, and then she's closer, wrapping her arms around her daughter.

"Madoka."

"Mama?" Madoka's voice is muffled within her mother's embrace.

Still holding on, Junko takes a seat, occupying the empty space that her appearance had created.

Madoka leans against her mother awkwardly, but her mother refuses to let go.

"Mama?"

Finally, "I just got off the phone with Hitomi-chan's parents."

Madoka tenses, and Junko holds her for a moment longer, before pulling back.

She had been expecting it—and even knowing the news beforehand doesn't stop the tears that well in her eyes.

Before she can move, a gentle hand brushes them away. "...Hitomi-chan didn't come home last night."

The pressure around her chest grows, and her vision is blurry as she lifts her head to meet her mother's eyes.

"Madoka... are you sure you don't know anything? About Sayaka-chan? Hitomi-chan? Did you hear anything from them? Anything at all?"

Madoka closes her eyes, feeling the trickle of water run down her cheeks. A pang of guilt—but she shakes her head.

Junko sighs softly.

The bed moves, and light rustling is heard.

"Thanks, Homura."

Curious, Madoka cracks one eye open, and there's a blur of purple, before she closes her eye again as something brushes against her skin.

The familiarity makes her body ache. She slowly opens her eyes, and after a few blinks, accepts the extended tissue that she knew her mother would be holding.

After a moment, Junko continues, "...a police report has been filed for the both of them. Apparently, there's been some kind of drama between the two over a boy."

Madoka sniffles, and wipes her nose with the paper. "...Kamijou-kun."

Junko nods, face grim. "...They're calling him in for questioning tomorrow morning. In case..." her voice trails off, and Madoka feels her mother's hard stare.

Before she can voice her question, Junko turns, and Homura flinches when Junko looks at her.

"Love... is a very strong emotion," Junko tells them. "It can make people do things they normally wouldn't... It can be used for manipulation, even if it's not intended." She glances over to Madoka, making sure that she is paying attention. "Don't you girls ever forget that."

Homura and Madoka both turn to face each other.

A held breath, and Homura is the first to look away. She casts her eyes to the floor, her thin shoulders slumping suddenly under an invisible weight.

Madoka feels something in her chest stir. Homura didn't deserve to look so small, bearing so much on her back.

Junko takes a deep breath, easily reading the now awkward atmosphere in the room. There's a lot she can say, but for now... she'll trust her daughter.

"They'll start their investigation for Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan's disappearance by questioning those who are closest to them. Family... friends. I know you two just returned from Tokyo, but they also want to talk to you, Madoka. Will you cooperate with them? I can put it off, but..."

Madoka swallows heavily. "I—" she clears her throat, "of course, Mama. I want-I want to help them find Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan. If—I can help them, I will."

Junko gives her a small smile, "I'll get the details from them tomorrow and see when they want to stop by. In the mean time," she stands to her feet, "it's been a long day, and you two must be tired."

She leans down to kiss the crown of Madoka's head, and then does the same to Homura.

Straightening up, she takes a moment, looking between both girls. "Get some sleep you two."

"Goodnight Mama," Madoka murmurs softly.

Homura looks away, "...goodnight..."

Junko glances back once more, before exiting the room. The door swings close behind her, and there's a small click when the latch catches.

Once she's sure her mother is gone, Madoka falls back onto the bed, letting out a large sigh.

When she remains lying there, Homura calls out to her. "Madoka...?"

Madoka breathes out slowly, and then in one quick motion, she lifts her arms, and forces herself to sit up. She turns to Homura, and sensing the moment is already lost, "...we should probably head to bed."

Homura nods, looking visibly relieved. She unconsciously pulls her hand close to her chest. "...we should."

Suddenly worried, Madoka moves closer. "Does your heart hurt, Homura-chan? Do you need a grief seed? Let me go get—"

Homura quickly shakes her head. "No, I'm fine. We should sleep."

"Homura-chan. Show me your soul gem."

Her brows furrow slightly, but when Madoka looks serious, Homura obediently complies.

After a shine of light, Madoka breathes a sigh of relief when she sees the purple gem: other than a few dark spots, it's still bright.

With another sigh, "...we should sleep," Madoka repeats again.

Homura quickly dispels her soul gem, sending it back into its smaller ring form. Once done, she hides her ears and tail, and then waits for Madoka to move first.

When she remains sitting, Homura gently nudges her with her shoulder.

"Madoka?"

Madoka reaches for Homura's hand, but stops when Homura pulls away.

"We should—sleep," Homura tells her, trying her hardest to ignore the hurt that flashes across Madoka's face.

Madoka tries to search Homura's eyes, but when the other girl refuses to look at her, she slowly gets to her feet.

"...I'll turn off the lights," Madoka says as she heads to the switch.

When Homura sees how dejectedly Madoka looks, she guiltily turns away, moving to crawl into bed. Junko's words repeat in her mind; maybe—

She clamps down on her thoughts; they had no more grief seeds to spare.

She slides her arms under the blankets, feeling the coolness of the fabric on her skin.

"I'm turning off the lights now, Homura-chan."

She makes a small noise of acknowledgement as she takes her place by the wall. She lowers her body to bury her face into the pillow. It's a comforting, familiar smell, and she rubs her cheek against the soft cushion.

The short trip to Tokyo already feels like a lifetime ago.

"Homura-chan?"

She blinks, drawing out of her daze as arms slip around her waist. The lights are already off, and Madoka is next to her.

"...It's good to be home, isn't it?"

She breathes out slowly, and closes her eyes. "...Yes."

Madoka tenses briefly, but suddenly relaxes. She pulls Homura closer, "goodnight, Homura-chan."

"...Goodnight, Madoka."

Words failing her, Madoka lets her frustrations deflate with her breath. She settles herself comfortably against Homura, and closes her eyes.

As Homura's breathing slowly evens out, Madoka remains wide awake.

She tries counting sheep, but after losing count for the fifth time, she carefully tries to extract herself from Homura's side. There's a small sound of protest, and when she stops moving, Homura immediately quiets down. She waits until she's sure Homura has fallen asleep, before she tries again.

Her second attempt is successful, and she quietly slips out of bed. With one last glance to the sleeping figure, she carefully makes her way towards the door.

It's a quick trip to the bathroom, and once done, she stands in the hallway, debating on her next move. She knows Homura will wake, but it's just a matter of when, and how bad the nightmare will be.

She hopes she has a little of time before then.

Throat feeling slightly parched, she decides to grab a glass of water; maybe it'll help.

Slowly, she makes her way to the kitchen, her way lit by the dim nightlights they leave on around the house. Her Mama claims it's in case Takkun wakes in the middle of the night, but Madoka knows it's more for when a drunken Junko tries to stumble her way to her room; she knows because her Papa had told her.

It's quiet, and the floorboards dip lightly under her weight as she slowly walks down the hallway.

She doesn't hear the usual sounds indicating her parents are still awake, so when the hall ends, opening up to the living room, she stops as soon as she spots her mother hunched over the dining room table.

Donning her familiar robe, her hair is tied up with her trademark towel band around her head.

Madoka is still deciding whether or not to interrupt when her mother suddenly looks up. She freezes as she's caught in her mother's gaze.

A familiar, kind smile is offered, and when her mother beckons her over, her feet automatically start moving before she can stop herself.

As she approaches the table, she finally notices the cup and bottle pushed off to the side. She curiously scans the papers scattered around; charts, diagrams, all filled with her mother's neat handwriting.

"Is everything alright?"

Madoka forces her eyes up, only to find her mother staring as if she's expecting the answer 'no'.

That is true, but she doesn't want to admit it.

She remains quiet, once again dropping her eyes to stare at the floor. She has many, many things she can say, but her mind has gone blank, and she can't even find the words to reassure her mom that she is doing fine.

"Is it about Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan?"

She lifts her head again, and this time her mother's expression looks tired.

Still tongue-tied, she can only nod in response.

"We'll find them," Junko tells her, voice clear and as hard as steel.

They stare at one another, and the sureness her mother exudes subsides her worries a little. She manages a weak smile, followed by a small nod.

Junko returns the smile, and then gestures to the chair in front of her. "Join me?"

Madoka nods again, and finally finds her voice. "Sure, Mama."

Before taking a seat, she heads to the kitchen to grab a cup of water. It gives her a chance to clear her thoughts, and when she finally has the cool glass in hand, she feels she can finally face Kaname Junko.

She takes a tentative seat across from her mother. "Is Papa sleeping already?"

"Mm, he had an early day today since he had to volunteer at Takkun's daycare."

Madoka nods.

"But," Junko gives her a wink, "don't worry—they'll both be home tomorrow. I already put in a request for lunch, so look forward to it, Madoka."

Madoka nods again. "I'm sure whatever Papa makes will be delicious," she murmurs absently.

She can feel a piercing gaze in her direction, but she takes a moment to sip her water, knowing her mother will wait patiently for her to speak her thoughts.

Not yet willing to talk just yet, her eyes look around the room, until they once again land on the papers on the table. She latches onto them, still unable to put her feelings into words.

"...Are you still working on your project?"

Junko glances down briefly to her notes, "just working ahead a bit. Everything's already been submitted and approved, so we're in the clear for now. Most likely we'll start the next part by next month." She quirks her eyebrow, giving Madoka another smile. "But—I'll spare you the details, since the last thing I want to do is talk about work at this moment."

To emphasize her point, she pushes the papers away, and instead reaches for her drink. Ice clinks as liquid swirls, and Madoka watches as her mother takes a large gulp, draining more than half of her cup in one swoop.

Junko breathes out a loud sigh. "That really hits the spot." She looks down at her drink, and then looks up at Madoka. To her surprise, her mother pushes the cup towards her. "Want a sip?"

"I thought—" she fumbles from the sudden offer, "I'm not old enough..."

Junko nods slowly, but more as a response than in agreement. "You're not old enough," Junko tells her, body slouching slightly, "and yet, it somehow feels like you are."

Madoka nervously licks her lips, "w-what do you mean, Mama?"

Junko stares absently at her drink; the condensation around the cup, and the small crescent shaped pools of water on the table shows she's been out here, drinking for a while, but when she casts her eyes back to Madoka, her gaze is as sharp and as intimidating as usual.

"Something happened to you in Tokyo."

Madoka freezes.

Junko shakes her head, "no, even before then. If I had to pinpoint it, it was around the time that Homura arrived. You've grown up, Madoka."

Madoka tries to calm down, bracing herself against the table, hoping her anxiousness isn't showing on her face. She knows if she looks away, she'll lose, and she forces herself to meet her mother's gaze. With each passing second, her resolve wanes, and she feels her defenses slowly crumbling.

Just as she's about to open her mouth, her mother suddenly turns away, lowering her body to rest on the surface of the table.

Her arms are stretched in front of her, and her eyes are now closed. "You're still young, Madoka, rely on Mama moreeeeee. Mama's not past her prime yet. I'm still cool, and 'in' with it."

The sudden change catches Madoka offguard. "Mama...?"

"Kids these days," Junko mumbles, head still down, "thinking they have to grow up so fast. Then again, I was around her age when I started acting out. No-no, my cute little girl isn't pushing away from me. She's just..."

Madoka blinks, and leans closer when her mother's mutterings drop in volume. "Mama...?" She waits for a response, but when there's no answer, she realizes that her mother has fallen asleep.

She sits back in her seat, letting the tension drain with a slow sigh. After another moment, she moves to take a drink.

The water is cool as it hits her tongue, and half her cup disappears before she places it back down. She looks over again when her mother mumbles something under her breath; she's still asleep.

This weekend had to have been hectic for her, and yet she was still there, bright and early to greet them at the station.

She's once more reminded just how much she loves her family. She quickly wipes the tears away before they can fall. She takes a few deep breaths, and after finishing the rest of her drink, she pushes her chair back. She'll need to call her Papa over to the kitchen, as it'll take the both of them to carry Junko to her bedroom.

Before she does that, she walks over to her mother. She hovers over her figure, and watches as she peacefully sleeps. She leans down, and gently kisses her mother on the forehead.

"Thank you, Mama," Madoka whispers softly. "I love you, too."

She straightens up, and starts walking to her Papa's room.

\\

After waking up her dad, it doesn't take them that long to carry Junko to bed, and the expended energy is just what Madoka needs in order to get to sleep.

"Goodnight, Papa," Madoka tells him, right before stifling back a yawn.

He smiles. "Goodnight, Madoka. Get some sleep, okay?"

She nods, and just as she's about to turn around to leave, he pulls her in for a hug.

"If you need anything, Papa will be just down the hall."

She smiles in response, knowing that he is also worried about her, just like her mom. She hugs him back. "Thank you, Papa. Goodnight."

With a wave, they part ways, and after another quick trip to the bathroom, Madoka makes her way back to her room, finally feeling ready to go to sleep.

She carefully pushes her door open, and glances inside out of habit. She squints, and pushes the door open wider to let more light in.

She pauses mid-step, finally noticing Homura sitting at the edge of the bed, body hunched over, face held in her hands.

Amy's soft meow sets Madoka in motion, and she quickly steps forward. Thinking quickly, she shuts the door to her bedroom, and after her eyes adjust, she moves to flip on the desklight, pointing the light towards the wall to dampen the brightness.

Homura still has not reacted, and Madoka approaches her slowly. "...Homura-chan?"

Homura does not respond, instead curling her body in, body still shaking, mind still trapped in her nightmare.

Hands are firmly placed on her shoulders. "Homura-chan."

She flinches at the touch, but Madoka wraps her arms around her, taking a seat on the bed as she hugs Homura close.

Panic breathes tickle her ear, and Madoka whispers reassurances in response, trying to calm her down.

She's pushed away, but Madoka holds on tightly, until finally, Homura collapses against her, unable to break free.

Amy bats her hand with her paw, and meows once more.

"Shhh, it's okay, Homura-chan. We're both here for you," Madoka says softly, stroking her head.

After what feels like an eternity, Homura finally takes in a shaky breath.

"...Sorry..."

Madoka sighs again, quickly counting backwards in her head to dispel her anger. She opens her eyes, and gently pulls away. Homura blocks her face with her bangs, and Madoka swipes them to the side.

Shame flashes across Homura's face, and she quickly averts her eyes.

Madoka pulls her in to kiss the top of Homura's head. "Did you just wake up?" She guiltily wonders how long Homura had been trapped in her nightmare.

"Maybe... a few minutes ago...?"

Amy meows in response, and Homura turns to her, frowning.

It only confirms Homura's lie, and with a sigh, Madoka starts to play with Homura's hair, brushing out the tangles from her tossing and turning. "...Did you want to talk about it?"

Homura is suddenly tense in her arms, and tries to extract herself from Madoka's embrace. "It—was nothing," she lies.

Madoka doesn't let her go, instead hooking her hands together behind Homura's back, holding her in place. "...Can I tell you one of mine?"

Homura immediately stops struggling.

Madoka fits her head on top of Homura's shoulder, taking a moment to feel each breath that Homura takes.

Homura hesitates, "you... you can tell me anything."

Madoka closes her eyes. "...I dreamt about Sayaka-chan, and Hitomi-chan." Their names cause a small hitch in Homura's breathing, but Madoka pushes on, "we were—it was like, any other day. We were walking together, maybe to school? But then—they started walking faster, and I couldn't keep up. No matter how much I called to them, they just kept walking, leaving me behind."

She can still remember their angry faces and accusing words when they had finally turned around.

Hands press on her back, "...I was too late, and I couldn't save you or Amy," Homura whispers softly.

Hearing her name, Amy licks Homura's hand. Homura peers over Madoka's shoulder, finding Amy looking up at her. She reaches over to affectionately scratch Amy's chin.

Madoka opens her eyes, pulling back for a glimpse of Homura's face. Fresh tears stain her cheeks.

Homura sucks in a breath, remembering the consequences of being too slow. Her hand stills, earning her a meow of protest from Amy. "I—c-couldn't—"

"We're here, Homura-chan. We're both safe." Madoka gently bumps their foreheads together. "...Do you need a grief seed?"

Homura turns away.

Madoka moves to retrieve the remaining grief seed leftover from their trip. She leaves their suitcase open, and quickly retakes her seat on the bed. One shine of light later,

Homura's soul gem is almost clear. Dark spots linger at the edges, but there's only one grief seed left, and it's not something Madoka wants to use.

"...I'm fine now, thank you." Homura stores the spent grief seed into her shield, before she sends her gem back to her finger. Her ears and tail disappear shortly after.

Madoka sighs. She leans against Homura, tilting her head against hers. They sit there, each lost in their own thoughts.

Until, "Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"...can I kiss you?"

Caught off-guard, Homura falls silent.

"...I won't, if you don't want me to."

"I—" Homura quickly draws back. "W-Why...?"

Madoka smiles, meeting the timid gaze peering at her. "Because—" she gently uses her sleeve to dry the remaining tears from Homura's face, "...I love you, Homura-chan. Because—" she takes Homura's hands, "I want to. Because—" she stares into Homura's eyes, "we don't have much time left..."

The truth once again comes round.

Madoka sees various emotions flash across Homura's face. She smiles in amusement when Homura looks to Amy for help, but the black cat merely flops onto her back, as if insulted Homura had to ask her.

Homura looks up again; Madoka is still waiting.

Finally, she dips her head.

"Look at me?" Madoka tells her softly.

Homura's gaze nervously flits from side to side. Her body tenses as Madoka repositions herself so that they face each other.

She moves closer.

When she sees how stressed Homura looks, she stops. Worried about Homura's heart, she gently places a hand atop Homura's chest, "relax, Homura-chan." She pulls back, giving Homura some space to breathe.

Homura takes in a deep breath, before exhaling. She repeats this a few more times. When she glances up, once again meeting Madoka's eyes, she quickly looks away.

She hears Madoka sigh, and glances over.

Madoka gives her a disarming smile, "maybe—tomorrow?"

When Homura doesn't agree or disagree, Madoka moves to get ready for bed. Halfway to her feet, a hand around her wrist stops her short.

She turns to Homura in surprise.

"...What if—tomorrow never comes...?" Homura whispers.

Madoka wordlessly sits back down. She glances to Homura in confirmation, and when she sees how hard she's trying to not run away, Madoka smiles, and leans in close.

Before Madoka makes contact, Homura reaches over, using her hand to cover Amy's eyes. It earns her a meow in protest that both girls ignore as Madoka moves closer.

A breath's away, and Madoka slowly closes her eyes.

There's no fireworks, no electricity, no explosions in the sky—

It's just her, Homura, and the subtle taste of tears.

For a brief moment, everything is still: the voices in her head—the demons in her mind. Madoka allows herself a little bit of joy—she's smiling as she pulls back.

"...are you—really okay...with someone like me...?"

The smile drops from her face, replaced by a surge of anger that she barely keeps in check. She leans in, bumping her head softly against Homura's.

"...it's because you're you, Homura-chan. No one else—just you, Homura-chan."

Homura does not respond, and Madoka holds her close, letting her cry. The frustration comes back, and she soon finds her own tears joining Homura's.

Eventually, the crying stops, and feeling drained, they both pull away.

Madoka gives her a watery smile, knowing her appearance is just as bad as Homura's. "...Want to wash up?"

Homura nods, looking embaraased.

They both stand. Amy lifts her head when she feels the bed move, but lowers it again when she sees them walking to the door.

Hands held, Homura shyly leads the way, walking a bit ahead of Madoka. Madoka follows behind her, using their distance to collect herself. She places a hand to her cheek, face slowly burning as their actions finally catch up.

They reach the wide bathroom, and though Homura walks in without flicking on the light, Madoka hits the switch when she follows after.

They both stop, blinded by the sudden light.

A few blinks, and then the door is closed, before they continue inside to the sinks.

As Homura washes her face, Madoka studies her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes are puffy and swollen, cheeks still tinged a light pink. She turns on the faucet to collect water in her hands. The water chills her skin, and she closes her eyes to splash water on her warm face.

She repeats this a few more times, until it feels like she has cooled down enough. Eyes half closed, she shuts off the water, and then blindly reaches for her face towel off the nearby rack. When she feels the fabric underneath her fingertips, she grabs it, and proceeds to wipe her face dry.

Once done, the stillness in the bathroom hits her ears.

She lowers the cloth and turns, unexpectingly meeting a stare of pale lavender. Homura's clutching her own towel in her hands, and her eyes are just as swollen and

puffy. With skin as pale as hers, she is unable to hide that embarrassed blush still on her face.

Madoka breathes in deeply, before taking a step forward. Homura blinks as Madoka reaches her, and immediately throws her arms around Homura's shoulders.

The sudden weight catches Homura offguard, and she stumbles back a bit. A second later, she catches her balance, supporting them both.

Before she can ask, Madoka tugs Homura down to her height, bringing their faces close again—she's off her mark by just a little, but close enough that Homura freezes at the contact.

Madoka's a bit more desperate this time, and when she pulls away, they're both out of breath.

Arms still holding her in place, Homura slouches as they stare at one another, breathing heavily.

Madoka presses their foreheads together, "...I love you, Homura-chan. Don't forget that."

The weight around her shoulders disappears as Madoka steps back.

Her bravado disappears, and she flushes as bright as her hair. She quickly turns away, hanging her face towel onto the rack as she tries to gain her bearings.

She gives a quick side glance, and when their eyes meet again they both look away. She clears her throat, "I'm—going to get some water. Did you want some?"

Homura fidgets with her face cloth, keeping her eyes to the tiled floor. "Y-yes, thank you..." she murmurs quietly.

Madoka nods, and stiffly starts walking to the door. Once there, she looks back, catching Homura's reflection in the mirror. Her ears and tail have popped out, unconsciously flickering about as she holds her hands to her face.

A triumphant smile sneaks across Madoka's lips.

Before Madoka disappears out the door, Homura glances behind her, catching a glimpse of pink. She swallows heavily, and turns back to the sink.

Seconds later, water rushes from the faucets, and Homura tries her best to cool herself down once more.

/

A cup of water later, and after a bit of awkwardness that earns them an annoyed meow from Amy, they settle back into bed. As they lie there, hands intertwined, Madoka suddenly sits up, twisting her body so that she can see the clock on her desk.

"Madoka...?"

She does a quick calculation, before sinking back down. She sighs as she scoots closer to Homura. "We only have a couple hours before we meet Mami-chan and Kyouko-chan."

Homura makes a small noise in response. "...Can you sleep?"

"Mm..."

It's a weighted question, directed towards the nightmares that have been frequenting what should have been their dreams. But at the moment, all she's feeling is warm and content, and with Homura by her side, she knows she'll have no trouble sleeping.

"Yes," she breathes out.

"Okay," Homura whispers softly, "I'll be here."

She suddenly hugs Homura tighter, and Homura returns the gesture, hoping to ease Madoka's fears. She unconsciously starts purring, and the soft rumbles distracts Madoka from her dark thoughts. Her eyes slowly close, and her grip relaxes. Just as she feels herself falling asleep, something flashes in her mind, and she jerks awake.

Pulse racing, she pats her hands on Homura's back, confirming the solidness, and reaffirming the feeling of heat underneath her fingertips.

"...Madoka...?" Homura mumbles, obviously in the midst of falling asleep.

"...You'll be here when I wake up, right, Homura-chan?" She holds her breath, and feels the seconds tick by when Homura remains quiet. Just as it feels like her heart is about to burst from her chest, Homura finally speaks.

"I'll be here."

Madoka curls closer, this time placing her head against Homura's chest. Past skin and these thin, fragile bones, Homura's heart still beats, aided by the magic that's helping to keep her alive.

Madoka sighs softly, "Homura-chan?"

"Hm...?"

"...I love you."

Those three words again.

Madoka feels Homura tense. After another moment, Homura breathes out slowly.

Madoka waits, and as much as sleep calls to her, she stubbornly refuses to let it claim her.

Not until she hears it again, loud and clear.

Homura slowly breathes in, and then out. She stops. "...I—"

Madoka holds her breath—

"...I love you too, Madoka," Homura whispers. She swallows quickly, and forces air into her lungs.

Madoka smiles at the victory. She closes her eyes, snuggling close. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

Homura falls into silence, once again lost in her thoughts. It isn't long until she realizes that Madoka has fallen asleep.

She gulps in air, mouth dry, and suddenly wanting to drown her thoughts in milk. With Madoka sleeping so close, she's unable to move away, and unconsciously starts purring to calm herself.

Slowly, she relaxes, and soon enough, her eyes droop close.

She'll be here for Madoka—for as long as she can be.

Even if that won't be very long at al**l.**

AN: Question: how long does it take to update a chapter?
Answer: almost 1.5 years

Happppppyyyyy belated birthday to Madoka-

Thank you to whoever's still reading, and thank you for reviewing

Now, let me just... crawl into this hole and—